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Jiro Akagawa best selection
Kadokawa bunko
赤川次郎ベストセレクション

Jiro Akagawa

Schoolday of the Dead

Translation by NineSoulsSea
Special Thanks to aNobody101

Schoolday of the Dead

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Kadokawa e-Bunko

Table of Contents

Prologue
Part 1: Musashino Academy
- 1. At the T Hotel
- 2. A Strange Cassette
- 3. New Students
- 4. The First Incident
- 5. Operation Begins
- 6. The Second Incident
- 7. Suspicion
- 8. The Third Incident
- 9. The Conclusion

Part 2: An Adventure on a Summer Day
- 1. Mr. Kurabayashi's Secret
- 2. An Unexpected Face
- 3. Lovers
- 4. To the Audio-Visual Classroom
- 5. Crisis
- 6. The Chase

Part 3: Schoolday of the Dead
- 1. The New Semester Begins
- 2. The Scheme
- 3. The Night Before
- 4. School Festival
- 5. Farewell, Academy

Prologue

"Machiko, hey, Machiko! Over here, over here!"

Machiko looked up toward the voice and, unable to believe her eyes at the incredible sight, froze in place. From the fourth-floor balcony of the reinforced concrete school building, her classmate Yoko Yamazaki was waving at Machiko, who was standing in the schoolyard. But to her astonishment, Yoko was standing on top of the fourth-floor balcony railing. The railing was only a few centimeters wide. Yet Yoko Yamazaki was walking along it as casually as if she were taking a stroll.

"What are you doing?!" Machiko finally snapped out of her daze and shouted.

"Just walking," came the carefree reply from above.

"That's dangerous! Get down!" Below the balcony was a concrete walkway. Machiko thought she had to call for help.

"I'm fine..."

"No way! What if you fall? Get down! Get down, Yoshiko!" It was already after school. There was no one nearby to alert. "Don't be stupid! Get down!"

"I get it." Yoshiko waved her hand. Machiko breathed a sigh of relief. Then Yoshiko stepped off the railing. Out over the edge.

Machiko had never seen anyone fall before. In movies, people fall slowly. Their screams linger as they plummet to the ground. But reality wasn't like that at all.

Yoshiko Yamazaki's figure vanished from the top of the railing as if wiped away in an instant. At the same time, there was a faint, dull thud, and Yoshiko lay curled up on the ground a few meters in front of Machiko.

It took her a while to come to terms with what had happened. "Yoshiko..."

Machiko covered her face with both hands and ran off. The janitor's office. Someone must be there. Machiko kept running.

It was dusk in May.

Machiko Yuki was seventeen. She had just started her second year at M Academy, a private high school here in Osaka, but today would be her last day. Due to her father, Shozo Yuki's, work, the family was moving to Tokyo. Her father was a department head at a trading company, so Machiko was used to moving and changing schools, but on this day, she decided to take one last, leisurely look around the school and came to the deserted campus as dusk fell.

Since the school was located in the city, the asphalt playground and the flower beds — which looked like something out of a dollhouse — were all crammed into a cramped lot. Machiko wandered through the dull gray school building, lingered for a while in her homeroom, lost in sentiment, and then strolled out into the schoolyard where the red sun was slanting in. The shadows of the horizontal bars and the flagpole stretched almost across the entire yard, creating a strangely nostalgic feeling. She hadn't actually spent that much time here, but perhaps because she had lived through those days at seventeen when everything was new, it felt like her alma mater.

After wandering around the schoolyard for a while and trying to hang from the horizontal bar, she started to head back toward the school building. That was when she heard that voice.

"Machiko, hey, Machiko. Over here, over here!"

Part 1: Musashino Academy

1. At the T Hotel

"It looks like Dad isn't here yet."

"We got here early. Let's sit down, Mom." Machiko and her mother, Keiko Yuki, sank into a nearby sofa.

"I don't like this sofa." Machiko laughed. "It feels like once I sit down, I won't be able to get up."

The T Hotel in Hibiya, Tokyo. It was a spacious lobby accessed through heavy revolving doors. Uniformed bellboys with gold braiding moved briskly about, and half the guests coming and going were foreigners.

Machiko listened to snippets of conversation from the foreigners passing by. There was English, French, and other languages she couldn't quite make out. Even so, despite not understanding everything, she somehow felt as if she had become a diplomat herself, standing in an international conference hall.

"This is kind of unpleasant, isn't it?" Her mother, Keiko, shifted restlessly in her seat. Being overweight, once she had sunk her heavy body into a chair, it was quite a struggle to get back up. Besides, Keiko wasn't very comfortable in places like this. Having grown up in Tokyo's working-class neighborhoods, she found such stuffy atmospheres difficult to handle. "Hey, Machiko, you really should wear a necklace with that dress."

"Really? What do you mean?" Machiko looked down at her pale blue dress.

"Yes, really. Why don't you go look for something while you're waiting for Dad? Go on. I'll be right here."

"It's okay, Mom. You don't have to go out of your way for me."

"I know that."

Machiko smiled. Ever since she witnessed Yoshiko's suicide in Osaka — which must have been a huge shock to Machiko — Mom had been looking out for her in every way possible.

"I'm fine now. Don't worry."

"But, Machiko..."

"It's true. I was shocked at the time, of course. But now, I'm actually more curious."

"How can you say that!" Keiko's eyes widened.

"But that's just how it is. No matter how I look at it, I just can't believe Yoshiko committed suicide."

"The police said it was suicide—"

"It’s true she jumped herself. But she was walking along the railing like a tightrope walker. She was usually such a quiet, unassuming person — I just don’t see why she’d do something like that, even if she were to kill herself."

"You can’t know what a dead person was thinking."

"It’s a mystery. I’m sure the police have figured something out."

"Please, let’s not talk about the police." Keiko said with a sour expression. "That was the first time I’ve ever felt so uncomfortable."

"Oh, Mom. That’s just their job..."

"It’s as if they were treating you like a delinquent. I just can’t stand that detective."

Machiko had been questioned by the police as the sole witness to Yoshiko’s death, but Keiko had stormed in there, shouting. "What on earth do you think you’re doing? Holding my daughter captive! She’s sensitive and delicate. It’s shocking enough that her friend died right in front of her, but locking her up for hours in a filthy, germ-infested dump like this is beyond insensitive! Let’s get her home right now! Besides, keeping her alone in a cramped room with a man is dangerous! Whether he’s a detective or the Chief of Police, he’s still a man. What’s with that face? If she sees a face like that — like some kind of frog monster — my daughter might have a seizure! Bring that girl here right this instant!"

Machiko, who was in the reception room with the detective, heard her mother’s tirade and struggled desperately to hold back a laugh. Thanks to the detective’s desperate persuasion, Keiko agreed to Machiko’s questioning on the condition that she be present, but that’s when the real trouble began. After all, every time the detective asked a question, she would interrupt with remarks like, "Is that really how you ask that?!" "Your grammar is wrong!" or "Don’t use such harsh language!" The rookie detective had no choice but to continue his questioning while wiping the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief...

To be honest, Machiko wasn’t particularly close to the deceased Yoshiko Yamazaki; they hardly ever spoke to each other.

Why on earth did Yoshiko die? Even if it was suicide, she’d never heard of anyone committing suicide in such a way. It was a shame that Machiko had left Osaka before the police investigation was over. She’d asked her close classmate to write her a letter if anything came to light, but she secretly hoped to solve the mystery of that death — which she alone had witnessed — on her own. Machiko was a huge mystery fan.

"Look, there’s Dad," Keiko said.

A tall, dapper gentleman entered the lobby with a brisk stride.

"Dad!" When Machiko waved, her father, Shozo Yuki, noticed her immediately and came over.

"Hey, did you have to wait long?"

"I just got here a moment ago."

"Dad, I’m hungry."

"All right, let’s go upstairs then."

"What are we having?"

"The French cuisine here is actually quite good."

The three of them headed for the elevator.

"French cuisine — doesn't that mean eating slugs?" Her mother, Keiko, said with a look of disgust.

"Come on, Mom. Escargot is snails."

"It's pretty much the same thing. I suppose they don't serve katsu don, do they?"

"I could ask, but I doubt they do."

"Fine. I guess I have no choice." As they stepped into the elevator, Keiko closed her eyes as if resigned to her fate.

Machiko always found it utterly baffling. How on earth had her father and mother — who were such complete opposites — ended up together? And yet, how was it that these two looked so perfectly suited to each other? Shozo had studied in Germany when he was young, and even now he frequently visits Europe on business. Though his hair is streaked with gray, he is in his prime at forty-five. His school friends always tell her, "Machiko's dad is so wonderful." To Machiko, too — aside from the fact that he's often away on business trips — he really is a charming dad. On the other hand, her mother, Keiko, is a down-to-earth, practical woman with a distinctly working-class spirit. Even though they're financially comfortable, her favorite pastime is hunting for bargains at department store clearance sales. Mind you, this is also part of her effort to work up a sweat and slim down a little.

Machiko absolutely adored her mother, who was so optimistic and easygoing about everything.

By the way, we mustn't forget to introduce Machiko herself. After all, she is the heroine of this story.

First of all, as the heroine, she's not exactly a peerless beauty — though it certainly wouldn't hurt if she were a pretty girl. In that regard, Machiko has inherited her father's refined features, complete with dimples when she smiles. It wouldn't do for her to be beautiful yet aloof and prim, but her talent for being friendly and putting people at ease comes from her working-class mother. Also, based on the typical image of a heroine, standing 180 centimeters tall is a bit of a problem, and weighing 80 kilograms might be too much for the readers' imagination to handle. However, Machiko's build is slightly slimmer than average — though when I say "slim," her bust, waist, and hips... well, never mind, that's irrelevant for now, so I'll refrain from revealing those details. Let's just say she has a well-proportioned figure.

There are various other requirements for a heroine as well. It wouldn't do for her to be out of breath and exhausted after running just fifty meters, or to faint every time she encounters something frightening. However, Machiko is by no means inferior to boys her age in terms of athleticism or courage. Well, Machiko seems to have nothing but good points, but if I had to name a flaw, it would be that she's more curious than most, has a vivid imagination, and tends to overthink things way too far ahead.

In any case, she is a perfect cocktail of her polar-opposite parents — that is Machiko. And this exquisite flavor is bound to intoxicate anyone.

"How did things go at school?" Keiko asked as she struggled with her sole meunière.

"I've wrapped it all up."
"Are you going to serve on the board again?"
"I have no choice. The principal is an old friend of mine. Even today, as soon as we finish eating, I have to head to the board meeting."
"Right now? My, that's tough." Keiko grumbled.
"What's it like there?" Machiko asked, her curiosity evident.
"The environment is top-notch, that's for sure."
"What? Is it boring?"
"Isn't that just fine? Um... what was it called again?"
"Since Principal Tezuka is also the founder, it's called Tezuka Academy, but in terms of its atmosphere — or rather, its overall feel — well, I suppose calling it 'Musashino Academy' would be more fitting."

2. A Strange Cassette

Just as the Yuki family was enjoying French cuisine at the T Hotel, three faces were peering timidly into a room at Tezuka Academy.
"...Hey, let's go home. ...Hey..." The one who spoke in a timid voice was a large, heavyset girl who, from the looks of it, didn't seem like the type to flinch at the slightest thing.
"Well... If we get caught, it'll be a real mess." In a muffled, indistinct voice, a lanky, skinny girl — the complete opposite of the one before her — mumbled in agreement.
"What are you talking about! We've come this far—are you seriously going to turn back now? There's no way we'll get caught. It'll be fine." The one egging the other two on was the smallest of the three, a girl wearing thick-lensed glasses.
Judging by their uniforms, there was no doubt that all three were students at this school. Though they were uniforms, they weren't the typical frumpy, baggy sailor suits. Instead, they were simple, smart gray jumper skirts paired with blue blouses and slim, Ivy-style ties. It was quite a stylish uniform. The reason it fit these three girls — who had such different body types — so well was that the uniforms were custom-made at a designated department store.
"But it'd be bad if we got caught. My English grades are pretty bad right now," said the chubby girl.
"If we get caught, we'll deal with it then. It'll be fine," the bespectacled girl, who was surprisingly feisty despite her appearance, declared in an irritated tone.
"I guess so... We'll cross that bridge when we come to it..." The tall one didn't seem to have a firm opinion and changed her mind quickly.
"Anyway, let's go in. Come on!" The three of them entered the console room (control room) behind the audiovisual classroom. The cramped room contained a 16mm projector, several slide projectors, and VCR decks, so if you took your eyes off your path for even a moment, you'd likely bump your head on something. The VCR decks were used to feed video signals to the two large televisions in the

classroom. On the opposite side of the equipment, steel shelves lined the wall, holding boxes of 16mm film and slides, as well as recorded VHS tapes.

"The tapes are right here. Come on, let's look!"

The three of them are looking for a cassette recording of a TV broadcast of a "Physics" experiment. The reason they're sneaking in to search for such a thing isn't, of course, because they're studious, but because a little rumor has recently been spreading among the students out of nowhere. You see — Mr. Oda, the physics teacher, is a truly fearsome tutor who hands out zeroes left and right on tests. Many a frail (?) female student has been reduced to tears by Mr. Oda. However, the prevailing rumor is that this rock-solid, strict Mr. Oda is actually a passionate fan of a certain female singer who is currently an idol among young boys. He keeps a photo of her in his pass case, taking it out to gaze at it and grin to himself whenever no one is looking. What's more, they say he fills the remaining space on his video tapes — originally recorded for physics classes — with her music shows, and secretly watches them here after school. If this rumor is true, it's the perfect opportunity to settle the score for all the grievances they've held against him. And so, the three of us have set out to verify the truth of the rumor.

"Um... 'Geography'... 'Chemistry'..."

"That way! Over there!"

"This is 'Wild Bird Ecology' and 'Biology'."

"Found it! This is it!" Once they found the cassette they were looking for, the trio's earlier nervousness vanished, and they were squealing with delight.

"Let's play it right away," said the girl with glasses.

"Surely Mr. Oda isn't coming to see this, is he?"

"He's at the PTA meeting right now, giving a passionate speech to the parents. There's no way he'd come." They immediately took the cassette out of the player and inserted the one they were looking for.

"Do you know how to handle it?"

"Leave it to me."

"Huh, didn't know you were tech-savvy." This time, the tall girl spoke up.

"I have one at home, so I'm used to it."

The one with glasses pressed the PLAY button. The chubby girl who had been peeking into the classroom through the projection window cupped her fingers to form a circle, giving the OK sign.

"Alright, fast-forward it." After repeatedly rewinding and fast-forwarding the tape for a while, they finally reached the end of the physics broadcast. As if to say, "Go for it," the three of us dashed into the empty classroom, took their places right in front of the TV, and stared at the screen - but the screen just flickered white.

"What the heck?"

"There's nothing on it."

"What a letdown..."

Just as the three of them were grumbling in unison, the face of that female singer suddenly appeared in a close-up on the screen, and she began singing "My Lover..." off-key.

"We did it! We did it!"
The three of them jumped for joy.
"Well, the next segment should be a sight to see," said the tall one.
"What are we going to do?" asked the chubby one.
"We'll ask the teacher to please show us this physics broadcast. If we do that, the teacher will be happy to show it to us."
"And then, the students will be the ones operating the VCR, right?" said Glasses. "So I'll volunteer for that role, fast-forward it on purpose, and play this."
"It'll be fun to see the look on their faces!"
The three of them went back to the console room, rewound the tape, and put it back where they found it.
"Hey," said the girl with glasses. "Since we're here, why don't we check out something else?"
"What was on it originally?" asked the chubby one.
"I don't know..."
The Tall One peered at it. "There's nothing written on it. I wonder what it is."
"I like the fact that there's nothing written on it. Hey, give it a spin."
They pressed the PLAY button and went to the classroom. On the TV screen, an old-fashioned portrait was displayed.
"I wonder what kind of painting that is."
The screen changed, and this time it was a landscape. Next, three paintings that looked like abstract art appeared in succession.
"It's an art program, I'm sure," said Tall.
"But it's strange that there's no sound," said Glasses.
"It's jewelry!"
Then, a large ruby ring appeared on the screen.
"It's beautiful."
A crown, a necklace, earrings... Dazzling jewels appeared one after another, and the three of them gazed at them in rapture. From this age on, women have a weakness for jewels.
"What are you doing?" The three of them jumped a good ten centimeters out of their chairs. Without their noticing, a teacher had entered and was standing behind them.
"What are you doing?" The teacher repeated.
"Um..."
Just as the tall one was about to make an excuse, Glasses jabbed her in the side with her elbow. Glasses knew from extensive experience that in situations like this, it was best to keep quiet. "Someone go stop the tape."
Tall Guy ran over, stopped the tape deck, and came back. "You do realize you're not supposed to be here without permission, don't you?"
The three of them stood silently, heads bowed. Staying quiet was the best course of action. The teacher watched them for a moment, then sighed. "All right. I used to do things like this all the time when I was a student."

The three of them looked up slightly, their faces showing relief. The teacher even had a gentle smile on his face. "I'll keep this between us. But you three mustn't tell anyone about what happened here or that I let it slide."

"Yes!" The girl with glasses replied cheerfully.

"I'll just ask for your class and names, though. Don't worry, I won't report you to your homeroom teacher."

"Second Year, Class C, Haruko Ono," said the girl with glasses.

"Likewise, Mayumi Yanagida," said the tall girl.

"Same here, Kyoko Hosokawa," said the remaining, slightly chubby girl.

"Very well. You may go now."

"Excuse us!" They were such opportunists — normally, they wouldn't even bother to say hello if they passed each other on the way home, but now they bowed deeply and dashed out of the classroom.

"Phew, that was a close call."

"That's why I told you not to do it." said Kyoko, the plump girl.

"It wasn't such a big deal, was it?" Haruko, the girl with glasses, said cheerfully, "See? If you just go for it boldly, the path will open up."

Since the audiovisual classroom was on the third floor, the three of them hurried down the stairs and left the school building as quickly as possible, hoping not to be spotted by any other teachers.

The three were completely oblivious to the fact that the teacher from earlier was staring intently down at them from the window of the audiovisual classroom. If they had seen the teacher's face, they would surely have shuddered at the expression — one that conveyed a bizarre cruelty, a far cry from the kindness they had seen moments before...

3. New Students

Kunitachi. It's not pronounced "Kokuritsu." It's read as "Kunitachi." Tezuka Academy is located here. This is known as an educational district, home to a great many schools, including the famous H University, T Academy, as well as music schools and metropolitan high schools. The atmosphere of a school town permeates the lush, green surroundings, where a row of ginkgo trees stretches in a straight line from the station.

On a clear May morning, Machiko Yuki walked down this avenue of ginkgo trees for the first time. It was about a fifteen-minute walk from the station to the school. Her father was supposed to come with her, but he had suddenly had to go to Hokkaido for work, so she ended up going to her first day of school alone. She thought: "The sky is outrageously (she got that expression from her mother) blue. A blue so deep it felt like she might be sucked right in." It was as if she were upside down in the air, looking down at a deep ocean. Her feet felt as if they were about to skip along of their own accord. The anticipation and anxiety of going to a new school, her heart racing in the crisp weather — all these emotions were jumbled together, causing a faint blush to rise to Machiko's cheeks.

Following the directions she'd been given, she arrived at Tezuka Academy without any trouble. It was still before eight o'clock. There wasn't a single student in sight. She was supposed to go to the principal's office at eight, but since she had a little time to spare, she decided to take a leisurely stroll around the school grounds. It wasn't a particularly large school. There were only three classes each for the six grades of junior and senior high. Two brand-new, three-story reinforced concrete buildings stood side by side, connected on every floor by covered walkways. Beyond them were the gymnasium and the swimming pool. The schoolyard was spacious. Well, maybe it wasn't actually that big, but to Machiko, who had always attended schools in the city, it seemed vast. And then there were the cherry trees lining the perimeter of the yard. Above them, instead of gray buildings, the blue sky arched seamlessly overhead, covering the sky without a single break — it was simply wonderful.

As I stood there gazing blankly at the schoolyard, I heard a voice from behind me say, "Hey."

"What are you doing?" When I turned around, a girl wearing a training shirt and leggings was smiling at me.

Seeing Machiko in her school uniform, the girl asked, "What grade are you in?"

"I'm a sophomore."

"I don't recognize you."

"I just started today."

"Oh!" The girl nodded, looking as if she understood. "Come to think of it, Mr. Kurabayashi mentioned there were new students. So we're in the same class."

"Oh, nice to meet you. I'm Machiko Yuki."

"I'm Yukie Nagaike." Yukie had a sturdy build, and her natural tan gave her a very healthy appearance. Machiko thought she looked a bit like her mom. Her smile, which suggested a cheerful disposition, made her seem very friendly.

"What kind of training?" Machiko asked.

"Karate."

"Really?" Machiko's eyes widened.

"Just kidding," Yukie laughed. "I eat a lot, you see. So I work up a sweat like this every morning to keep from getting too fat."

She really does take after Mom in that way.

"So, what do you say? Shall I show you around inside?"

"I'd love that."

"In return, we'll go for a light jog."

"Sure. Believe it or not, I used to be the top runner in the 1,500-meter race at my old school."

"Not bad. Alright, let's go!"

Machiko, still in her uniform, picked up her shoes and started running. The two of them ran and walked at their own pace, circling the school building, dashing up to the third floor, and running back down, pointing out, "That's the cafeteria (Yukie was quick to point that out first)," "That's the locker room," "That's our Class 2-C..."

When they returned to where they'd started, they were understandably a little out of breath and sweaty. But it was an indescribably pleasant kind of tiredness.
"Oh, it's already 8:15." Machiko glanced at her watch. "I have to go see the principal. See you later, then."
"Our homeroom teacher, Mr. Kurabayashi, is really cool, you know."
"I'm looking forward to meeting him." As Machiko made her way to the principal's office, she felt satisfied, thinking she'd already made a friend.

Principal Ichiro Tezuka sat back comfortably in his sofa and looked at Machiko.
"Well, you certainly do look just like Yuki. Is your father still busy, as usual?"
"Yes. He's in Hokkaido right now."
"He's a man who's always on the go. He's always been that way." Principal Tezuka was said to be an old friend of her father's, though he was considerably older than him. He gave the impression of a kind, middle-aged gentleman; he didn't act haughty, but his friendly tone was a bit overbearing. Well, educators are generally like that, so it can't be helped, Machiko thought. There was a knock at the door, and a tall, slender young man entered.
"Did you call for me?"
"Hello."
"Hello, Mr. Kurabayashi. This is our new student, Machiko Yuki. I'd like to ask you to look after her."
"It'll be my pleasure."
"Is that so?"
It was no wonder Yukie thought he was cool. He was tall with chiseled features, and his tanned skin gave him a sturdy, athletic build. With his slightly long hair and a flawless outfit consisting of a turtleneck sweater and a navy blazer, he looked impeccable. He must be the object of every girl's admiration in the class.
We followed Mr. Kurabayashi to Class 2-C. It was on the third floor.
"I looked at your grades from your previous school," Mr. Kurabayashi said on the way. "You're quite an excellent student. I was particularly impressed by your English." Mr. Kurabayashi is in charge of the English club. "We read mysteries in their original English."
"I see. That's great. I'm a huge fan of Christie and Queen myself."
"Oh, how wonderful!" Machiko exclaimed without thinking.
"Are you too? That'll be fun."
As we entered the classroom, the students were bustling about, taking their seats. While Mr. Kurabayashi was introducing her, Machiko stood quietly by his side. She was slightly stiff, aware that the eyes of the entire class were on her, but being the center of attention wasn't a bad feeling. Young as she was, she was still a girl. Yukie Nagaike gave her a little wink from her seat. As luck would have it, the seat next to Yukie was empty, and once the introductions were over, Machiko ended up sitting there. The two exchanged a quiet smile.
There were about forty students in the class. The classroom was spacious, and the desks and chairs were all generously sized. Places like this were built with great luxury in

mind. When Tezuka Academy was founded, it even made the news for a bit because so many of the students were the children of the wealthy. While the tuition was by no means cheap, the school had a reputation for having excellent facilities and a superb environment. Even now, it seems there are quite a few business leaders — such as company presidents — who send their daughters here from quite a distance away. For that reason, fundraising efforts, such as donations, are extremely successful. Naturally, the teachers' salaries are higher than at other schools, and I'd heard stories — which sounded too good to be true but might actually be true — that nearby private schools had to raise their salaries just to keep their teachers from leaving.

As soon as morning homeroom ended, a lively crowd gathered around Machiko.

"Hey, where do you live?"

"What does your dad do for a living?" — questions that felt like a background check...

"What are your hobbies? Do you play any sports?" — questions straight out of a matchmaking profile...

"Do you have a boyfriend? Any relationship troubles?" — questions straight out of a women's weekly magazine...

"Want to join the English Club?"

"Why not join the volleyball team?" — and even recruitment pitches like these.

There was even a gem that went, "If you're having trouble with homework, just ask me. We have staff who are students at the University of Tokyo, and we offer our services at low rates."

It was all so lively and carefree — probably because they were all young ladies from relatively wealthy families who'd never known hardship. Machiko quickly blended into the atmosphere, feeling as if she'd been sitting at the same desk with them for years.

4. The First Incident

"It's such a fun school," Machiko told her mother over dinner.

"I'm so glad," Keiko said, nibbling on a pickled plum. "I was worried it might be full of snobby kids."

"You should come to a PTA meeting sometime."

"I'm not really good with that sort of thing."

Machiko wondered why her mom always seemed to dislike things like the PTA. It wasn't as if this had always been the case, but ever since Machiko started high school, her mom had been particularly reluctant to come to school. Uncharacteristically, Machiko thought her mom must just be shy. "Dad's going to be on the board over there, right?"

"I hear so," Keiko said curtly. "He's always taking on all these troubles just for my sake, huh..."

"You don't need to worry about that. He's the type of person who's happier when he's busy."

"Is he in Sapporo tonight?"

"I don’t know, where could he be?" Just then, the phone rang, and Keiko went to answer it. "Oh, Dad — where are you right now? Huh?"

Machiko could hear her mother’s voice. When her mother returned, Machiko asked, "He said he’s in Sapporo?"

"No, he just arrived at Haneda. He said he’s on his way home now."

Machiko and Keiko exchanged glances and burst out laughing.

"Really, what a busy man he is."

Machiko suddenly pricked up her ears. "Oh, rain." She walked over to the window and peered out at the dark outdoors."It’s coming down pretty hard. The weather was so nice earlier today..."

"I hate places like this. You can’t even tell what the weather’s like when you’re inside."

Since the move had been so sudden, the family was temporarily staying on the sixth floor of an apartment building in Nakano. It was quite spacious, but Keiko, who preferred traditional Japanese houses, seemed to find it unbearably cramped.

Machiko stepped out onto the balcony with its eaves and stared intently at the rain falling before her, glistening as it hit the ground. Looking down at the street far below, she suddenly remembered Yoshiko, who had jumped off the balcony.

I wonder if they’ve found out anything since then. I should call my friend in Osaka. Machiko hurried back to her room. Diving onto the bed as if she were jumping into a pool, she reached for the phone on her desk. It was connected to the one in the hallway, so as long as that one wasn’t in use, she could make outside calls. Keiko hadn’t been too keen on putting a phone in Machiko’s room, but her father, Shozo, had relented, saying, "Well, Machiko is an only child, after all..." For the time being, Machiko would be a valued customer of the NTT.

Was the area code for Osaka "06"? Lying on her bed, Machiko waited for the other end to pick up.

"Hello... Oh, Reiko? It’s Machiko. Yeah, how are you? I’m fine over here. ...How’s school? ...Things are going great for me. You know, it’s a really nice place." After spending nearly fifteen minutes describing her school, "So, Reiko, about Yoshiko — have you found out anything?"

"Oh, that..." She sounded hesitant on the other end of the line. "You see... I’ve been told not to tell anyone about this."

"Reiko, really! Were we that close? I get it. Well, then, never again—"

"Wait, wait! I’ll tell you... You know, my uncle’s a newspaper reporter, right? Well, I heard something, and apparently, he’s been told not to write about it in the paper."

"You know he’s tight-lipped."

"Yeah... Listen, apparently when Yoshiko died, she was doing drugs."

"Drugs?" Machiko sat up in bed without thinking.

"Yeah. You know, stimulants."

"Like LSD or something..."

"Exactly. So, apparently when you do stuff like that, you get these hallucinations where you feel like you're a bird flying through the sky or something like that."

"So that’s why she did that..."

"Apparently, she thinks walking along the top of the balcony railing is easy — or something like that."
"Yoshiko on drugs, huh..."
"I was shocked, too. If it hadn't been my uncle who told me, I definitely wouldn't have believed it."
"So, what's the police doing about it?"
"My uncle doesn't know anything more than that. I'm sure the police are quietly investigating. Listen, Machiko, don't tell anyone, okay?"
"I know. I swear I won't say a word. Not even to Mom and Dad!"
Yoshiko and drugs... After hanging up the phone, Machiko lay back on her bed and stared intently at the ceiling. Still, where on earth did that quiet girl Yoshiko learn about drugs? Her house was right near the school, wasn't it? It was a long way from the downtown area. She wasn't the delinquent type, and she didn't have any friends like that either. But then again, everyone has their secrets. Yoshiko and drugs go about as well together as the Nobel Prize and the Academy Awards...
The police must be secretly probing the drug ring behind Yoshiko. What started as the suicide of a mere high school girl looks like it's turning into a huge scandal. Machiko felt her heart race as if it were her own problem.
After a while, she heard voices outside the door. It's Dad! Machiko jumped out of bed. "Welcome home, Dad!" she said, opening the door.

"This rain is really getting on my nerves." Kyoko Hosokawa thought as she hurried along the night street. Yes, she was the chubby girl who had sneaked into that audiovisual classroom.
Today really is my unlucky day... This morning, my alarm didn't go off and I overslept. By the time I rushed to school, I was five minutes late and got chewed out by the teacher. On top of that, since I'd rushed out of the house in a panic, I forgot my math textbook — it's been a total disaster. On the way home, feeling frustrated, she stopped by a friend's house. While listening to rock music, the rain started. She wanted to ask someone to pick her up, but everyone in her family was out today. She borrowed a spare umbrella from her friend's house, but it was old and leaking.
I just want to get home. That was all Kyoko could think about. Her hair and blouse were wet and cold, and water had seeped into her shoes when she stepped in a puddle — she felt like crying.
It was usually a ten-minute walk from the private railway station to her house, but today it felt like she'd been walking for thirty minutes. The path wound through a quiet, deserted residential neighborhood. It was a little past ten o'clock, and there wasn't a soul in sight. Kyoko hurried along the road, walking beneath the streetlights that sparkled in the rain. She had no time to look back, so she didn't notice at all that a car was following her from behind with its headlights off.
After turning right and left several times, she finally came out onto the straight road leading home. "Just another two or three minutes," she thought, feeling relieved.

The car that had been following Kyoko stopped momentarily as it turned onto that road, as if taking a breather. Then, it turned on its headlights and shot forward with ferocious speed, like a beast with eyes wide open lunging at its prey.

The sound of the rain drowned out the car's engine. Realizing the car was approaching from behind by the headlights, Kyoko turned around. "Maybe I should step to the side of the road...", she thought. The blinding headlights were already bearing down on her. She didn't even have time to be surprised.

As the car sped off into the rain and darkness, Kyoko was left lying face-down in a puddle, her umbrella bent into a mangled heap, both pelted by the cold rain.

Something must have happened. That's what Machiko thought the moment Mr. Kurabayashi entered the classroom. Everyone seemed to be thinking the same thing, staring at the teacher with a vague sense of unease. Students are sensitive to their teachers' moods.

There was not a trace of yesterday's smile; Mr. Kurabayashi looked slightly pale, his expression stiff. After bowing, class representative Akiko Miyahara stood up to take attendance as usual.

"No, it's fine." Mr. Kurabayashi stopped Akiko Miyahara and said, looking around the classroom. "I have some bad news." The entire classroom fell completely silent. "Kyoko Hosokawa was in a car accident last night."

"What?!" The one who cried out was Haruko Ono, the girl with glasses. "Teacher! How is she?"

Avoiding Haruko's gaze, Mr. Kurabayashi lowered his eyes and said, "Kyoko has passed away."

There was no sound. Mr. Kurabayashi took a thousand-yen bill out of his pocket and held it out toward Akiko Miyahara, who was still standing there in a daze. "I'm sorry to ask this, but could you please go buy some flowers?"

Taking the money, Akiko Miyahara shuffled slowly toward the door. Then, suddenly bursting into tears, she ran out of the classroom. Haruko let out a loud cry and collapsed face-down on her desk. Sobs began to spread throughout the class.

"The principal has something to say..." Mr. Kurabayashi's words didn't register with anyone.

Machiko didn't cry. Even though it was Kyoko Hosokawa who had died, she couldn't even clearly recall her face. After all, she had only been here for a single day yesterday. Yet, in a completely different sense, Machiko was stunned. Just the other day, she had witnessed Yoshiko's bizarre death, and now, here again... How could the deaths of such young girls keep happening one after another? Was this just some unfortunate coincidence? Or was there something more?

Machiko simply stared intently at the single, empty desk.

Machiko's father, Shozo, attended Kyoko Hosokawa's funeral in his capacity as a board member.

It was a sunny but windy day, and as her classmates lined up to offer incense, their hair was tousled by the wind, making them look even more overcome with grief.

Kyoko’s father was a department head at a construction company, and with company representatives joining the crowd, the number of attendees was quite large.

"A hit-and-run? How despicable!"

"If they get caught, they should be torn to pieces!"

"No, he should definitely be burned at the stake!"

Such harsh words reached Machiko’s ears as she waited to offer incense. But the ones grieving the most were her best friends, Haruko Ono and Mayumi Yanagida. These two had done everything together with Kyoko. Both Haruko and Mayumi would stop crying for a moment, only to look at the coffin and start crying again.

Machiko offered incense and bowed to Kyoko’s parents. Her parents, still in their mid-forties, were bowing mechanically with hollow eyes red and swollen from crying. It was a grim sight, she thought.

At the reception desk, her father, Shozo, was talking to a man who appeared to be someone from the school, but when he saw Machiko, he came over and said, "I’m staying here a little longer, so you go home first."

"Okay. But come home soon."

"I know. Be careful."

My father’s face looked unusually grave and serious.

"Machiko, are you going home?" Yukie Nagaike jogged to catch up with me.

"Yeah. I’m sorry, but I just can’t bear to stay."

"Me too. It’s just too much. I feel like I’m going to die right here."

The two of us left the Hosokawa residence and started walking. After walking a few dozen meters, a black mid-size sedan passed them, then stopped just before the Hosokawa residence. Two men in slightly worn suits got out.

Machiko stopped to watch, and Yukie asked her in surprise,

"What’s wrong?"

"Detectives."

"Huh?"

"Those two are detectives."

"How can you tell?"

"I’ve seen them around."

Turning to Yukie, who was staring wide-eyed, "Hey, maybe they’ve found out something about the hit-and-run driver. Let’s go check it out."

Saying that, Machiko quickly headed back toward the Hosokawa house. Yukie hurried after her.

"What are we going to do?"

"I don’t know. I just want to go see."

The men, who looked like detectives, had gone around to the back entrance of the Hosokawa house and were talking to a woman — who appeared to be a relative of the Hosokawas — near the staircase leading up to the kitchen. The woman nodded and disappeared.

"I wonder what they’re doing?" said Yukie.

"Let’s get a little closer."

"Won't they get mad at us?"
"If they find us, we'll just say we got lost looking for the exit. Come on, let's go."
Machiko and Yukie made their way along the outside wall of the house until they reached some nearby bushes where they could hear the detectives' voices, then quietly hid themselves.
Kyoko's father emerged from the kitchen.
"Have you found out anything?"
"What is it?"
"Well... I'm truly sorry to bother you at a time like this—"
"Never mind that," Kyoko's father interrupted the detective. "Have you caught the culprit yet?"
"Not yet - but we're doing everything we can to investigate, so soon, surely..."
"Is that so...? No, since you went out of your way to come here, I assumed... But what brings you here today?"
"Actually..." The older of the two detectives said, looking as if he were struggling to speak. "It pains me to have to tell you this..."
"The fact is, the results of our on-site investigation revealed something rather unexpected."
"What do you mean?"
"The car that hit your daughter showed absolutely no signs of having applied the brakes."
"So it fled without even stopping? What a monster!"
"No, it did come to a stop. About twenty meters ahead. But then, the car reversed."
Kyoko's father looked confused,
"The car reversed?" he muttered.
"That's right. After hitting your daughter, the car stopped briefly, then reversed and ran her over again."
Kyoko's father turned pale.
"Yeah."
"So... so are you saying the driver went out of their way to come back and run Kyoko over?" Kyoko's father staggered, leaned his back against the wall, and finally regained his composure. "But... if that's the case, it's as if the culprit was targeting Kyoko from the very beginning..."
"It certainly seems that way. In other words, this appears to be a premeditated murder..."
"That's why we came to ask if you had any idea who might have done it," said the other detective.
"No way... No... I can't even imagine such a thing... Something like that..."
Kyoko's father could only shake his head in disbelief. Machiko and Yukie quietly slipped away from the bushes.

5. Operation Begins

"Hey, could you do me a favor?"
When Machiko called out, Haruko Ono, who had been dozing off at a window seat, sleepily took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes.

"Machiko? What do you need?"
"I have a favor to ask."
"What is it?"
"That thing."
"Oh!" Haruko nodded.
It was Haruko, the girl with glasses, who offered to do homework for a bargain price.
"But Machiko, this is unusual for you." Although Machiko had only been in this class for two weeks, word had already spread that she was quite good at her studies.
"I'm going out with my boyfriend for a bit. So I won't have time to do my math homework."
"Sure. I'll take it. Um, you need it by tomorrow, right? Well, that means I'll have to send it by express mail, so it'll be a little pricey."
"That's fine. Do I pay now?"
"No, it's fine. You can pay me once it's done. Can you come by my house on your way home tomorrow? I'll give it to you then."
"Sure. I'll come. Thanks a lot."
"Thanks as always!" Haruko, too, seemed to have finally recovered from the shock of Kyoko's death; she made a funny face and pretended to flick her fingers across an abacus.
During lunch break, Machiko and Yukie were having lunch at a table tucked away in the back of the student cafeteria.
Although it was called a student cafeteria, it was a bit different from the typical ones around here that serve things like breaded cutlets with nothing but breading or miso soup with no actual ingredients. While it was self-service, it offered a restaurant-quality menu ranging from fried shrimp and sautéed pork to gratin, spaghetti, and hamburger steaks, and the food actually tasted pretty good.
After the meal, there was ice cream and coffee available. Even the coffee wasn't from a vending machine — there was a counter where they served coffee properly brewed in a siphon, so it was quite refined. Of course, with all that, the prices weren't exactly cheap. But they were at an age with hearty appetites. Quite a few students finished their meals and left the cafeteria still licking soft-serve ice cream.
"So... how was it?" Yukie asked, still chewing.
"It was great. Tomorrow, on the way home, I'm going to stop by Haruko's house. I'm going to find out what I can."
"But somehow, I still can't believe it."
"What?"
"That Kyoko was murdered. I mean, for someone so big, she was actually quite timid and quiet."
"The culprit..."
"But the police are saying that for sure."
"I suppose so. But there's not a word about it in the newspapers or anything."
"They're investigating discreetly. So as not to tip off the killer."
"Would you like some coffee?"
"That sounds nice." Machiko brought two cups of coffee from the counter.

"I wonder what a murderer looks like," said Yukie.
"I'm sure he's just an ordinary person you'd see anywhere."
"But how could he do something like that? Going out of his way to drive back and run her over..." Yukie frowned and shook her head.
"Hey, do you think there's a chance Kyoko was killed by mistake, mistaking her for someone else?"
"I thought that at first, too. You know, she stopped by a friend's house on her way home to borrow an umbrella, right?"
"So, maybe because of that umbrella, she was mistaken for that friend..."
Machiko shook her head. "That can't be it. If Kyoko had been hit near her friend's house, that might make sense, but she took the train all the way home and was hit on the way to her own house."
"I see."
"I think the killer knew Kyoko really well. I mean, it was in the rain, after all. If the killer had accidentally hit someone else, it would have been a disaster, so they must have been absolutely certain it was Kyoko —that's why they went out of their way to run her over so deliberately."
"I wonder if we can't identify the killer from the car."
"They say if there are any traces left — like paint chips or something — we'll definitely be able to figure it out. But seeing as they haven't been caught yet, the culprit must be quite a clever criminal."
"Be careful."
"Of what?"
"It's fine to investigate, but what if you become a target next time..."
"I'll be fine." Machiko smiled. "If the culprit shows up targeting me, that would be just what I'd hoped for."
"Don't be ridiculous." Yukie frowned, looking worried.
Leaving the cafeteria, the two of them spent the rest of their time strolling around the school grounds. It was already June, and the muggy rainy season was just around the corner. Even on sunny days, the air felt somehow damp.
On the field, the teachers were playing baseball, and the students were watching, cheering loudly.
This school has some interesting teachers. Machiko had thought that after attending classes for a while. Take Mr. Hayashi, the math teacher, who was currently in the batter's box. For some reason, he had the nickname "Ghost." He was getting on in years, yet he loved mountain climbing, and whenever the topic of mountains came up, he would forget all about the lesson and talk nonstop. However, the moment he suddenly realized he was in the middle of class, he would abruptly stop talking and say, "Now then, for the practice problem, the answer to ( ) is..." It's so abrupt that everyone bursts out laughing.
Then there's the pitcher, Mr. Nishida. He teaches art and is still in his early thirties. He's small and baby-faced, so students with strong maternal instincts adore him (?) as the "cute" teacher, but he tries to exude an artist-like air by always holding a pipe in his mouth and standing aloof.

Oh, Mr. Hayashi hit the ball. He’s running. Well, at least he thinks he’s running. It’s a routine ground ball to shortstop. Mr. Koizumi at shortstop lets it go through his legs, sending the crowd into a frenzy. Thanks to that, even with Mr. Hayashi’s legs, he makes it safe to first base.

Mr. Koizumi, scratching his head, is a Japanese language teacher with a bit of a middle-aged spread. He calls himself "Buddha Koizumi," while the students call him "Demon Koizumi" — opinions are sharply divided, but teachers are generally a mixture of both.

Now, up to the plate is our very own Mr. Kurabayashi. With his exceptionally long legs and great build, the crowd’s cheers of "Go for it!" naturally rise an octave. Living up to expectations, he pulls the first pitch sharply to left field, and the elderly outfielder — Mr. Hanamura, the Chinese literature teacher — chases after the rolling ball, panting heavily. With Ms. Kurabayashi’s long legs, it should have been an easy home run, but Ms. Hayashi was plodding along in front of her. So, in the end, it was just a double.

Now, with runners on second and third, it was a perfect opportunity. Just then, "Let me bat!"

Yukie, who had been watching with bated breath, burst out. A cheer erupted from the students. Since Yukie is popular even among the teachers, it was time for pinch hitter Yukie Nagaike to take the field.

As Machiko raised her voice to cheer her on, Mr. Nishida threw the first pitch. With a shout of "Here goes!", Yukie swung her bat, making a truly satisfying sound as the white ball flew far, far away, out of the schoolyard.

Ms. Nishida stood there in stunned silence. As the students cheered wildly, Yukie rounded the bases triumphantly...

Meanwhile, the ball landed on the path along the field, bounced two or three times, hit the fence of the house across the street, and rolled back onto the path.

The one who picked up the ball was a young man in his early twenties. He was wearing a light cream-colored sports shirt and crisp, neatly pressed blue slacks. He had handsome features and slightly long hair. Holding the ball, he looked around, wondering where it had come from, when—

"Excuse me!" A female student came running out the back gate and called out to me. It was Machiko. She had come to pick up Yukie’s home run ball so she could display it in her room.

Machiko saw the young man standing there and stopped dead in her tracks.

"Could you give me back the ball?"

The young man smiled and said, "Sure," then tossed the ball to her. "Did you hit that?"

"No, a friend did."

Machiko had the vague feeling that the young man was staring at her for an unusually long time. Maybe there’s something on my face...

"Thank you, and I’m sorry." Machiko bowed her head slightly, turned on her heel, and ran toward the back gate. As she entered the gate, she glanced back and saw the young man walking away quickly. She felt a little disappointed.

Of course, Machiko had no way of knowing that she would meet that young man again.
The bell signaling the end of lunch break rang out across the schoolyard, and Machiko hurried back to the school building at a run.

Haruko Ono’s house was about a ten-minute walk from Kichijoji Station, past a somewhat chaotic commercial district. It was a large two-story house with a row of windows lining the facade. Well, since it was an apartment building, that was only to be expected...
Haruko’s father managed this building and about three others, and seemed to be living quite a wealthy life. Haruko’s family lived in half of the first floor of this building. Haruko had an older brother and sister, but both were already married and living in their father’s apartments at reduced rent.
"They’re such opportunists," Haruko laughed. "But I plan to do the same when I get married. Except, I won’t let him give me a discount on the rent."
"You’ll pay the full amount?"
"I’ll get it for free!"
"What do you call someone even more opportunistic than that?" Machiko said with a laugh.
Haruko left Machiko waiting in her room, went up to the second-floor tenant — a University of Tokyo student — and returned in about ten minutes.
"Sorry to keep you waiting."
"Thanks - here’s the money."
Machiko added the "express delivery fee" to the standard 2,500 yen, paying a total of 3,000 yen.
"I can’t give you a receipt, though." Haruko said with a serious expression. "Well, I’ll make you some tea, so please wait a moment." As Haruko headed into the kitchen, Machiko looked at the homework the University of Tokyo student had done. Actually, she had already done it herself.
"What’s this? It’s wrong." Machiko gave a wry smile.
Haruko’s room was a six-tatami-mat Japanese-style room covered in mustard-colored carpet. It felt oddly cramped, filled with furniture like a sofa-bed, a desk, a bookshelf, and a wardrobe, as well as a hodgepodge of dolls and stuffed animals, plus posters and photographs covering an entire wall. Leaning back on the sofa and looking up, Machiko saw The Beatles staring down at her from the ceiling.
On the top shelf of the bookshelf sat a photo frame containing a picture of Haruko, Mayumi Yanagida, and the late Kyoko Hosokawa, all three with their arms around each other’s shoulders.
"Oh, I’m sorry." As she was looking at the photo, Haruko came over with a cup of tea.
"It’s fine. It’s not like I bought the tea myself."
The two of them sipped their tea while nibbling on biscuits. Just as Machiko was wondering how to bring up the subject, Haruko spoke up first.
"After Kyoko passed away, Mayumi and I decided to give up sweets for a year. But we only lasted a week. When I apologized to Mayumi, she told me she’d only managed to hold out for four days."

"That’s fine. It’s the thought that counts — Kyoko would be happy."
"I thought so too, so I decided to eat them much more than before," Haruko nodded. "I wish they’d catch the culprit soon."
"It doesn’t matter if they don’t."
"Huh?"
"As long as I know who it is, that’s enough. I’ll take revenge myself." She didn’t seem to be joking. She was serious.
"Hey, Machiko, have you heard anything?"
"About what?"
"The other day, on my way home from school, a detective stopped me."
"Really? Why?"
"He said he wanted to ask about Kyoko. Whether anyone had a grudge against her. What kind of boy her boyfriend was. Whether things were going well between them..."
I see. From the police’s perspective, it’s only natural to think that Kyoko’s best friend might know something about her secrets, rather than her parents.
"Isn’t it strange for a simple hit-and-run? It’s almost — almost as if someone killed Kyoko on purpose..."
"Do you have any idea who it might be?"
"Not at all!" Haruko denied it immediately. "Kyoko wasn’t the kind of girl anyone would hate."
Haruko stood up and walked over to the shelf, staring intently at the photo. "We got into all sorts of mischief, but I was always the one who started it, and Kyoko just followed along. Because of me, she got scolded by the teachers so many times — I feel like we did some really bad things. But it’s no use apologizing now."
"Don’t think about that. Kyoko wouldn’t hold a grudge against you."
"I suppose so... She was such a hopeless softie, after all."
"What was her boyfriend like?"
"She liked rock music, and she said she met him at a concert."
"Do you know him?"
"I’ve met him. He was the same age as us, tall and lanky, and seemed like a pretty nice guy. But why do you ask?"
"Oh, I was just curious."
Machiko sipped her tea, wondering if there was anything else she could ask. But when it came down to it, nothing really came to mind.
Haruko told Machiko all about the pranks the three of them had pulled over the years. The time they stuffed paper gunpowder into Mr. Nishida’s pipe, and while he was smoking it, it went "Bang!" with a loud noise, and he fell over in his chair; the time they soaked chalk in blue ink to turn all the chalk blue; the time they put water in the teacher’s fountain pen instead of red ink while he was grading tests...
"It was fun, really," Haruko sighed. "It’s strange, though. I just don’t feel like pulling pranks unless the three of us are together. But it’s a shame to call it quits just because we got caught halfway through one. I can’t graduate until we pull off one more."
"Did the most recent one get found out?"

"Yes. It was the night before Kyoko died. We snuck into the audiovisual room—" Haruko began, but then hurriedly covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh no, we promised to keep this a secret."
"Oh, come on, tell me."
"Hmm... I wonder what to do..."
"Why not?"
"Listen..."
The phone rang in the hallway.
"Hold on a sec, sorry."
"Okay..."
Haruko hurriedly dashed out. Machiko finished the rest of her tea.
"Hello, this is the..." Haruko's voice came through. "Huh? No, I don't know, she hasn't come by... She hasn't come home yet? Well... we went our separate ways today. Yes, I see..."
Haruko returned looking somewhat worried.
"What's wrong?" Machiko asked. "Who was that?"
"Mayumi's mom."
She was referring to the other member of the trio, that tall girl, Mayumi Yanagida.
"Ms. Yanagida? What did she say?"
"She said Mayumi hasn't come home yet."
Machiko glanced at her watch. "It's only six o'clock. It's still early."
"It's her piano lesson day. It starts at 5:30, and she always looks forward to it — she's never been late before. But this time..."
Machiko suddenly felt a pang of anxiety. Could it be...? No, surely not!
"Do you have any idea where Mayumi might have gone? A boyfriend or something?"
"No, she doesn't. If she did, I'd know about it."
"But let's try to find her somehow." Driven by some vague, ominous premonition, Machiko said, "Hey, do you think something's off too?"
"...Yeah." Haruko blinked rapidly behind her glasses and said, "Me too. It's like — a bad feeling in my gut, I guess..."
"Listen, Haruko, Kyoko was murdered — it was premeditated!"
For a moment, Haruko seemed unable to process what she was hearing. Machiko repeated what the detective had told Kyoko's father at the funeral the other day. Haruko's face turned bright red.
"How awful! I'll kill them. I'll definitely find the culprit—"
"Wait, wait a minute. Right now, it's Mayumi-san's turn."
"Mayumi? Even Mayumi?"
"I don't know why Kyoko was killed, but if there was some reason we don't know about, Mayumi-san might be in danger too."
Haruko jumped to her feet and said, "I'm coming too!"
"I'm going to the school. She might still be there for some reason."
The two of them rushed out the front door. Please, let nothing have happened... Machiko felt as if she were praying.
Passing through the still-bright streets, the two hurried toward the station.

6. The Second Incident

Two hours before Machiko and Haruko set off at a brisk pace toward the station, just past four o'clock, Mayumi Yanagida quietly entered the school auditorium.

While many schools use their "auditoriums" as dual-purpose gyms, this one was built more like a small concert hall. The floor sloped like a movie theater, lined with cushioned seats, and both the interior design and the acoustics were of such high quality that it would have been perfectly suitable for a regular concert.

The stage was spacious and fully equipped with stage sets so that plays could be performed during school festivals and other events. In addition, it was capable of screening movies and was equipped with overhead projectors and other equipment for special lectures and similar events.

Mayumi climbed the small staircase at the side and stepped onto the stage. A grand piano stood in the corner of the stage. This was what Mayumi had come for. She stood quietly in front of it and lifted the lid. It wasn't locked. Ms. Misako Misawa, the music teacher, was forgetful and rarely locked it. Mayumi placed the sheet music she had brought on top of the piano, removed the velvet cover, and tried striking one of the keys. A deep, resonant sound rippled out across the spacious auditorium.

Mayumi sat down at the piano and immediately began playing the etude she was currently learning. At first, she played timidly and softly, but as she became absorbed in the music, she began to strike the keys with all her might, playing forte. "How different this is from playing the piano at home!" Mayumi thought. At home, she had an upright piano, and to avoid disturbing the neighbors, she had laid a thick rug underneath it to muffle the sound. "A piano that doesn't resonate? That's like coffee without coffee — it's just not right."

Mayumi would come to the auditorium from time to time to play this grand piano. Professor Misawa wasn't unaware of this, and of course, she wasn't supposed to enter a place like this without permission, but since she was practicing so earnestly, he seemed to have turned a blind eye.

The clock in the auditorium read 4:30. I still have thirty minutes to spare. Her piano teacher was coming at 5:30, and since Mayumi's house was right near Kokubunji Station, she'd make it if she left here around 5:00.

Mayumi felt as if she were giving a recital in a grand concert hall; she deliberately closed her eyes or shook her head as she continued to play. It was a time when she found playing the piano utterly fascinating. Besides, a recital for the students of her piano teacher was scheduled for the fall, and she had to practice over the summer to prepare for it.

"What should I play...?" Generally speaking, as long as it wasn't something completely unreasonable, she was allowed to play whatever piece she wanted. Pieces that were too difficult would be a struggle, but if she chose a very famous piece, she'd have to worry about overlapping with someone else's choice. A piece that was moderately well-known, not too well-known, and just difficult enough without being too hard. "I wonder if there's such a convenient piece."

Mayumi flipped through the sheet music she'd brought and began playing Chopin's Étude, Op. 10, No. 3. The piece is known as "The Farewell."

From the wings, a pair of eyes watched intently as Mayumi sat at the piano. The figure walked around to the back of the stage and climbed a metal ladder.

"You're really giving it your all." Startled by the voice behind her, Mayumi turned around.

"Oh, Professor."

It was Professor Misawa from the music department. She appeared to be in her late forties. With her gentle features, she looked like she'd be better suited to teaching kindergarten.

"I'm sorry, I just came in without asking..."

"It's fine. We're not using it anyway."

"You don't mind?"

"No, not at all. Have you decided what you're going to play at the recital?"

"No, I'm still undecided."

"I see. Anyway, I'll definitely come listen to you. Do your best."

"Yes!"

"See you later. It's hard to play with me here, isn't it?"

"Is it okay if I play until five o'clock?"

"Sure. The janitor will come by to check on things and lock up in the evening anyway, so you can just leave it as is."

"Got it."

Once Ms. Misawa had left, Mayumi returned to the piano.

The man was looking down at Mayumi from directly above the stage. He was standing on a narrow walkway that ran horizontally and vertically across the stage, used for repairing and inspecting the machinery that operated the curtain, lighting fixtures, and backdrops.

Though he was momentarily startled by the unexpected appearance of Professor Misawa, he let out a sigh of relief when he saw that Mayumi was alone again. Playing it safe, he waited a moment, then took a screwdriver from his pocket and began unscrewing the bolts holding the large, heavy spotlight that illuminated the stage.

"Farewell Song" was one of Mayumi's favorite pieces. Although she sometimes sang it with lyrics, the original piano-only arrangement was overflowing with "song." She began playing it again from the beginning.

Chopin. Maybe I should play Chopin after all... Suddenly, she stopped. She'd heard a sound coming from the stage. Looking over, she saw something silver lying in the center of the stage.

"I wonder what that is..." Standing up from the piano, Mayumi walked toward the center of the stage. She wasn't wearing her glasses, and her eyesight wasn't that great. She went closer and bent down to take a look. "What is it? It's just a screw."

What had looked silver was actually a thick screw. It must have come loose and fallen from somewhere.

I’d better pick it up; it would be dangerous if someone stepped on it... Just as she reached out to pick up the screw, a heavy light fixture fell silently from above, plummeting straight toward Mayumi.

Machiko and Haruko arrived at school around seven o’clock. As expected, the sky was already growing dim, and thick darkness had settled over the area.
"The school gate is closed."
"Leave it to me." Haruko walked around to the side of the school and led Machiko to a spot where the wall had been torn down, leaving only a chain-link fence.
"Are we going to climb over this wire fence?"
Machiko looked up, and Haruko silently grabbed the fence with both hands and gave it a sharp shake.
"Oh my!" Machiko’s eyes widened as she gasped. The wire fence—no, the entire steel frame holding the wire—came loose and crashed heavily to the other side.
"You didn't know, huh? It’s handy when I’m running late or need to slip out during class."
After climbing over the fallen fence to get inside, she propped it back up as it had been. Since it was right behind the gym, it was a spot that didn’t really catch the eye.
"Where are we looking?" Machiko asked.
"First, homeroom. Then the English Club room. After that..."
"We’ll figure out the rest later."
The two hurried toward the second-year Class C classroom. The room was dark, and there was no one inside. They walked through the connecting hallway to the other building. The club rooms occupied half of the third floor of that building, lined up in a row.
The tennis club, the table tennis club, the volleyball club...
"Hey, look!" Haruko called out.
Light was spilling from under the door labeled "English Club." The two exchanged relieved glances.
"She’s here, I’m sure of it," Haruko said.
"She really is a drama queen..."
Haruko threw the door wide open and said,
"Mayumi, you—"
"Oh, it’s you two."
Mr. Kurabayashi looked up from his desk.
"What brings you here at this hour?"
Haruko and Machiko stood there speechless for a moment. Finally, Machiko said,
"We’re here to look for Yanagida-san."
"Yanagida? Is something wrong?"
"She hasn’t come home yet," said Haruko.
"Teacher, have you seen him?"
Mr. Kurabayashi shook his head and said, "No, I haven’t seen her. I’ve been here since before five o’clock working on English Club business, but Yanagida didn’t show up."

"We’re worried," Haruko said, almost pleading. "Kyoko went through what she did the other day, and today Mayumi hasn’t come home even though she has her piano lesson, which she always looks forward to..."

Mr. Kurabayashi put down the pen he was holding and fell deep in thought.

"Hmm... I hope not, but—"

"You know that Kyoko was murdered in a premeditated attack, don’t you?" Machiko asked.

"I heard it from the police. I couldn’t believe it. I told them I had absolutely no idea who the culprit might be, but..."

"We rushed over here because we were worried that maybe even Yanagida had been targeted."

"Did you check the classroom?"

"Yes, but no one was there."

Haruko, who had been deep in thought, suddenly snapped out of it and exclaimed,

"The auditorium!"

"Huh?"

"The auditorium! It must be there. Mayumi often plays that grand piano there by herself after school."

"Let’s go check it out."

"Alright, I’m coming too." Haruko dashed out first, followed by Mr. Kurabayashi, with Machiko trailing slightly behind.

They ran down to the first floor and hurried down the hallway. The auditorium was connected directly to the hallway by a passageway. The sound of their three pairs of shoes shuffling in a light jog echoed through the deserted corridor.

Just as the heavy doors of the auditorium came into view and the three of them picked up their pace even more, the door swung open from the inside, and the janitor tumbled out.

"Sir, what’s wrong?" Mr. Kurabayashi called out. The janitor turned pale as a sheet and collapsed to the floor as if his legs had given out.

"T-Teacher... t-t-there’s a... a... a terrible... situation..."

"What’s wrong? What is it?"

The janitor pointed at the door with a trembling finger and stammered, "I-inside... someone’s collapsed... a student..."

Haruko let out a short scream and covered her mouth.

Professor Kurabayashi pushed the door open and stepped inside. Machiko and Haruko followed. They passed through the lobby, opened the door, and the three of them entered.

They emerged right below the stage. There was no one in front of the piano. The lid was open, and the sheet music was still lying there.

Mr. Kurabayashi climbed the stairs at the back of the stage and stopped dead in his tracks.

"Don’t come! You mustn’t come!"

But Machiko and Haruko had already made their way up onto the stage.

"Mayumi," Haruko said in a whisper.

Mayumi Yanagida lay face down in the center of the stage, her long body sprawled limply. Her head had been split open. A heavy-looking spotlight lay nearby, stained with blood.

"Mayumi!" Haruko tried to rush over. Machiko held her back,

"No! Don't go!"

"Let go!"

"It's no use! She's dead!"

Haruko collapsed onto the floor, sobbing. Machiko wrapped her arms around Haruko and wept as well.

Professor Kurabayashi approached Mayumi's body cautiously and stared at it in a daze, but eventually, as if coming to his senses, "The police. I have to call the police. Yuki, you—"

"I'm fine. ...Teacher, please go call them. I'll wait here."

"All right." As Professor Kurabayashi ran out of the auditorium, Machiko wiped away her tears and stood up. The shock had subsided. I'm okay now. I have to pull myself together! Leaving Haruko, who was sitting on the floor in a daze, she walked quietly over to Mayumi, who was lying on the floor. She looked at the flashlight lying there, then glanced up at the darkness above.

It must have fallen from up there. Was it an accident? Or did someone drop it?

An accident was out of the question. There was no way such an accident could happen by chance at a time like this. If that was the case — then it was murder. She didn't know why, but following Kyoko, Mayumi had been killed as well.

Machiko glanced briefly at Haruko. Haruko might be the next target.

Still, it was strange. The piano was placed at the edge of the stage, yet Mayumi was lying dead in the center of the stage. Why did she go out of her way to come all the way out here? Looking at the piano, it seemed Mayumi had been in the middle of playing. She had deliberately stood up and walked all the way to stand directly under this spotlight. Machiko suddenly noticed something shiny in Mayumi's hand and bent down to look. In her half-open palm lay a brand-new, thick screw, gleaming silver.

7. Suspicion

"Why don't you just quit that school?" Her mother, Keiko, said.

"No way." Machiko shrugged, munching on a piece of toast for breakfast.

"But it's creepy, isn't it? Two people..."

"It was a coincidence, Mom. Even the police ruled it an accident."

"You can't trust the police."

Machiko remained silent and took a sip of her black coffee. Deep down, she thought the same thing. There's no such thing as a coincidence. What on earth is the police thinking? But she didn't want to transfer schools right now. It seemed true that some parents had requested to transfer their children, but in the end, the school's persuasion had made them change their minds.

It might sound like she was taking advantage of the situation — and she felt bad for the deceased Kyoko and Mayumi — but having stumbled upon such a huge mystery, as a mystery fan, she was determined to solve it herself no matter what. Machiko had secretly made up her mind.

"And on top of that, it's all kids from your class..." Keiko was still muttering to herself.

"Mom, you're such a worrier. I'm the daughter of a board member. If I quit school, the other students would all start dropping out one after another, wouldn't they?"

"Well said." Her father, Shozo, poked his head in.

"Oh, Dad, good morning."

"It's pretty good, yes."

"Good morning. How are you feeling?"

"Fine. That's how young people should be."

"Aren't you worried at all?"

"Machiko just said it herself. It's a coincidence."

"Even so, they say if it happens twice, it'll happen a third time."

Keiko looked dissatisfied. "You're overthinking it."

Shozo gave a wry smile. "Could you make me some coffee?"

Once bitten, twice shy. That was exactly what worried Machiko the most. She felt certain that if there were to be another victim, it would undoubtedly be the last member of the trio: Haruko Ono.

"Dad, are you coming to school today?"

"Yes. I have a meeting this morning, but I'll definitely be there this afternoon."

A week had passed since Mayumi's death. Machiko's father, Shozo, had cut short his business trip to Hawaii and had just returned last night. An emergency board meeting was to be held.

Things at school were finally settling down. Naturally, with the successive deaths of classmates — especially in Machiko's class —laughter had ceased for a while, and it had felt like a wake, but the atmosphere was gradually returning to normal.

The one who could never return was Haruko Ono. Naturally, Haruko also believed that Mayumi had been murdered, and though she didn't say it out loud, she must have been thinking that she might be next. She had become completely silent; her former mischievousness was nowhere to be found, and she had stopped speaking to her classmates almost entirely.

"Well, I'm off then."

"Be careful." Even her mother's words sounded more anxious than usual.

It was a cold morning in the rainy season. The rain fell without end, and even with an umbrella, it seemed to seep through her clothes before she knew it.

She boarded the Chuo Line at Nakano. At the next stop, Koenji, Yukie Nagaike got on as usual. The two of them had an unspoken agreement to always sit in the same spot on the same train.

"Good morning."

"Good morning. Hey, Machiko, did you do your English grammar homework?"

"Sort of."

"Show it to me later."

"OK. Hey, how's that thing we were talking about going?"

Yukie shook her head with a grim expression. "I asked her family, but they said Mayumi didn't keep a diary or anything."

"I see... That's too bad." Machiko had thought that Mayumi Yanagida might have left behind a diary or something similar, and that there might be a clue in it, so she had asked Yukie — who had been fairly close to Mayumi — to look into it.

"Did her family look suspicious?"

"Not really. I told them we were going to run an article about Mayumi in the school newspaper, so I asked if they'd lend it to us if they had one. They knew I used to be on the newspaper staff, so they didn't think anything of it."

"Huh? You were in the newspaper club?"

"Why?"

"Yeah. Though I got kicked out pretty quickly."

"I tried to print it too hard and broke the stencil."

MISSING TEXT HERE

"I'm afraid of heights, though..." Yukie looked up at the metal ladder and let out a timid voice.

"So am I. Come on, grit your teeth, Watson." There wasn't a soul else in the auditorium during lunch break. Machiko had always wanted to go up there. "But... if I climb up, the ladder might break."

"It's made of iron!"

"Fine, I get it. I'll go up, okay...?"

Reluctantly, Yukie began climbing the narrow ladder. Machiko followed right behind her. It was dim up on the stage, but after a while her eyes adjusted. Thick iron pipes, chains, and ropes ran all over the place, and she couldn't make head or tail of it. Running between them, as if connecting one iron beam to another, was a narrow walkway. It was properly covered with planks and had a handrail about waist-high.

"Oh, so this is what it looks like."

"It's over there." Yukie, having forgotten her fear, looked around with curiosity.

Machiko urged Yukie forward, and they walked along the walkway running directly above the stage. The steel beams supporting the lights that illuminated the stage below ran parallel to the walkway, allowing workers to stand on it to replace or repair the lights. One of these lights was what killed Mayumi.

"This is it." White powder was scattered around the light right in the middle. It was from when the police had taken fingerprints. They hadn't found any particularly suspicious prints, though.

"So it was right underneath this," Yukie said, almost to herself, and peered down. Immediately after Mayumi's death, fearing another such accident, the school had installed a wire mesh about two meters below the light, so that if it ever fell, it would get caught there.

"I wonder if the police have completely ruled it an accident," Yukie asked.

"It seems so."

"I mean, can you imagine such a sturdy screw coming loose? Look, it doesn't budge at all. Besides, it was brand-new and shiny, wasn't it?"
"New screws are actually more likely to come loose. The ones that are rusted red — even if they get old and break, they almost never come loose."
"I see. But why was it in Mayumi's hand?"
"Here's what I think. The culprit loosened the two screws holding the light in place, then supported the light with one hand, took one of the screws, and dropped it onto the stage. Mayumi was playing the piano, heard the sound, wondered what it was, came down to look, and tried to pick it up. And then—"
"I see. I wonder who on earth did such a terrible thing."
"I don't know. Anyway, it must be someone familiar with this place — someone who knew Mayumi often played the piano here. And one more thing. The incident happened around five o'clock, right? The culprit must have left the school afterward, so I think it has to be someone who wouldn't arouse suspicion by staying at the school late."
"But then..."
"Shh!"
"That's right. The culprit must be someone from within this school. A teacher, a student, or a staff member — I don't know who, but it's definitely one of them..."
"So that means we're at school every day with a murderer. I hate that!" Machiko said sharply.
"Someone's climbing up the ladder!"
Sure enough, when they strained their ears, they could hear the sound of footsteps on the ladder they'd just climbed up.
"What should we do?" Yukie said in a low voice.
"Anyway, let's head to the far end of the hallway. Come on, hurry."
The two made their way to the opposite end of the hallway, where a curtain hanging down beside the stage was drawn, and hid themselves inside it.
"We're in the shadows here, so we'll be fine."
Machiko pulled the edge of the curtain aside slightly to peek out. Yukie also cautiously craned her neck.
Soon, the head of a man climbing up appeared at the far end of the hallway.
"Oh, look," Yukie whispered.
"Shh, be quiet!"
It was Mr. Kurabayashi. As he walked down the aisle, he stopped right where the two of them had been standing earlier, in the center, and stared intently down at the stage. Machiko thought there was something odd about his demeanor. One moment he was fiddling with the lights or looking up at the ceiling, and the next he was leaning heavily against the railing, wearing an expression of deep distress unlike anything he'd ever shown before, sighing repeatedly and shaking his head.
They must have stayed like that for nearly five minutes. When she sat up, as if speaking to no one in particular,
"I really do need to set the record straight," he said in a firm tone, then walked back down the aisle.

They heard the sound of someone climbing down the ladder, and once the footsteps faded from the hall, Machiko and Yukie emerged from behind the curtain and let out a sigh of relief.

"Oh dear, the curtain's all dirty. My blouse is covered in dust." Yukie flapped her clothes here and there.

"What do you think Professor Kurabayashi meant by what he just said?" Machiko asked, deep in thought.

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Maybe the professor knows who the culprit is."

"No way! I mean, if that were the case, he wouldn't just keep quiet, would he?"

"That's exactly why he probably isn't certain it was murder. It could be an accident, after all. But there are things that seem suspicious to me. For example, what if someone gave false testimony and Professor Kurabayashi just happened to know it was a lie? Even Professor Kurabayashi couldn't just assume that person was the murderer based on that alone. That person might have lied for some other reason. But from Professor Kurabayashi's perspective, he can't just ignore it...

Yukie looked at her a little skeptically. "That's just your speculation, isn't it?"

Machiko hesitated for a moment before saying, "Not really."

"What do you mean? Do you know something?"

"Well..."

"You know, I told you about the time Haruko and I came looking for Mayumi together, right? I said that Professor Kurabayashi was working in the English Club room from just before five o'clock."

"Well, when Haruko-san suggested Mayumi-san might be in the auditorium and we all rushed out, I caught a glimpse of the desk. There was some report paper and a pen on it. But there was nothing written on the paper. It was blank. I couldn't find any papers that looked like they'd been finished either. There was nothing else on the desk. Don't you think that's strange? He was supposed to have been working from before five until seven, after all."

Yukie looked away from Machiko and fell deep in thought.

"I think Professor Kurabayashi knows something," Machiko said. "But she has her own reasons and can't bring herself to say it outright."

The two fell silent for a moment, each lost in their own thoughts.

"Oh my!" Machiko exclaimed, startled. "What time is it now?"

"No way. The afternoon classes have already started!"

The two hurriedly climbed down the ladder and dashed out of the auditorium. That's the tough part of being a student detective.

It's not as if she needed an excuse, like "even great detectives need a break," but that evening, Machiko went to a concert by her favorite folk singer, and it didn't end until after nine. Trying to take a shortcut from the station, she hurried down a quiet street. The rain had finally stopped, and the wet pavement glistened in the streetlights.

As she walked down a slight slope, she saw a group of boys, around seventeen or eighteen, gathered next to a parked compact car. Even though they were clearly

minors, they had cigarettes in their mouths (though Machiko had smoked before herself), wore flashy shirts and sandals, and sported sunglasses — giving them a somewhat delinquent look.

Feeling a sense of foreboding, Machiko moved to the far side of the road to pass by. Suddenly, two of them came running over and blocked her path. Machiko looked them straight in the eye and said, "Please move out of my way."

"No way."

"She’s pretty hot, isn’t she?" one of them said. "Hey, wanna come for a drive with us?"

"Don’t be so cold, come on," said the other guy, chewing gum. "It’s gonna be fun. We’re all going to the beach in the middle of the night — what’s the big deal?"

"I’m in a hurry!" She forced her way between the two of them, only for the remaining three to block her path again. Machiko found herself trapped between them. "Let me through! I’ll scream!"

She told herself she mustn’t look scared.

"Oh, really? If you can, go ahead and do it."

"What’s got you so upset?"

"Are we not hot enough for you?"

As they slowly closed in on her, Machiko’s legs went weak and the blood drained from her face. Just then, "Hey, what are you doing?" a voice called out.

"What the—" The thugs all turned toward the voice at once. A tall young man was standing there, watching Machiko and the others.

"It’s nothing. We’re just talking," one of the thugs said.

"They're harassing me!" Machiko cried out.

"Hey, cut the crap," the young man said as he stepped forward. "Let her go."

Machiko had a vague feeling she’d seen that young man before.

"It’s none of your business. Back off." One of the thugs reached into his pocket, and a switchblade sprang out with a click, its blade glinting. Another had somehow produced a chain, dangling it from his hand. "If you don’t want to get hurt, you better get out of here fast!"

Machiko held her breath, staring at the young man. This could easily end in serious injury. "Please, go get someone! I beg you!"

The young man glanced briefly at Machiko. The thug, knife at the ready, advanced toward him. The other one swung his chain, making a whooshing sound...

The young man suddenly spun around and ran up the hill.

"Hah, what a wimp."

"It’ll be a hassle if someone comes to help. Let’s get out of here."

"Come on, let’s go."

Machiko felt cornered, and cold sweat trickled down her forehead.

"Hey, stop acting all prim and proper, missy. Come with us." The blade of the knife was suddenly pressed against her cheek, and Machiko flinched at the cold touch. "If you just come along quietly, we won’t hurt you."

"That’s right. We’ll all take good care of you and show you a good time."

Oh, please, someone, anyone, come help me...

One of the thugs roughly grabbed Machiko by the shoulder and tried to drag her toward the car.
"No! Stop it!" she screamed instinctively.
"You want to get hurt?" The knife was pressed against her neck, and Machiko found herself unable to speak.
"Come on, be a good girl."
It’s over. No one’s going to help me. Just as Machiko instinctively closed her eyes, she heard a strange sound. It sounded like something rolling down a slope. The delinquents looked up too.
"What’s that noise?"
Suddenly, a handcart rolled down the hill. It was the one she’d seen at the construction site along the way, loaded with steel beams.
"Watch out!"
"It’s coming right at us!"
Machiko pushed aside the delinquent’s loosening grip and bolted forward. The handcart picked up speed and barreled into the flustered group of delinquents. Some were knocked flying, others rolled out of the way, and still others screamed and tried to run away.
"Hey! Hurry up!" Startled, Machiko looked up the hill and saw the young man shouting at the top of his lungs. "Come on!"
All right. Regaining her energy, Machiko sprinted up the hill in one go.
"Run!" The young man and Machiko sprinted at full speed down the night street. Finally reaching the crowded area in front of the station, they stopped. For a moment, the two of them were panting so hard they couldn’t speak.
"Thank you... thank you so much..."
"No... It’s nothing... I’m just... glad you’re safe..."
In the bright light, Machiko stared intently at the young man’s face and gasped, "Ah!"
"You’re... the one who picked up my ball that time, aren’t you?"
The young man looked at Machiko with a puzzled expression for a moment, but eventually nodded.
"Ah! That game at Kunitachi!"
The two looked at each other and smiled somewhat awkwardly.
"My name is Machiko Yuki."
"I’m Hideto Koyama." He glanced around briefly. "How about we find a place to rest for a bit and have some tea?"

Summer had suddenly begun. By the next morning, the rainy season had vanished without a trace, and a dazzling blue sky stretched overhead. During lunch break, the number of students playing in the schoolyard had dropped significantly. They were at that age where they were starting to worry that sunburn would lead to dark spots and freckles. They sat in small groups of two or three in the shade, chatting.
Even though it was still late June, it felt as hot as mid-July. The students weren’t required to wear their uniforms during the summer, and their colorful blouses, each chosen

to their own taste, were as vivid as a flower garden. Looking up at the sky from the balcony, Machiko thought, "It looks like we'll be able to go swimming soon."

I wonder what we'll do this summer. Every year, her father takes about a week off in the summer and takes Machiko somewhere. Renting a vacation home in Karuizawa or Hakone and cooking for themselves was always a lot of fun.

But this year, she wasn't really in the mood. Machiko herself knew the reason. It was this murder case. Although she wasn't directly involved, she was one of the people who had discovered Mayumi's body, and it was true that she was more interested in this mystery than most.

Even so, Machiko thought irritably. What on earth are the police doing? They can't even find the hit-and-run car — it's not like they're cops from a mystery novel; they might as well be blind as a bat."

"Machiko."

"Oh, Yukie. What's up?"

"I just came from the staff room after asking around. Apparently, they've identified the car that hit Kyoko."

Machiko choked involuntarily.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing - so, who's the culprit?"

"Well, apparently it was a stolen car. Or rather, it was parked in front of the station where Kyoko got off. It seems the culprit used a spare key to unlock it and drive it."

"What happened to the car?"

"Apparently, the culprit returned it to where it was originally parked. So the actual owner didn't notice a thing. They said they knew the paint was chipped and there was a small dent, but they just assumed it had been bumped by another car while it was parked there."

"Doesn't that owner seem suspicious at all?"

"Apparently, the police tracked down the car right away. But they didn't make it public because they were having trouble verifying whether the owner's story was true. In the end, it seems the owner was cleared of any wrongdoing." "So the police weren't just goofing off, then. The owner isn't from this school, is he?"

"Apparently, he's just some office worker with absolutely no connection to this school or Kyoko."

Machiko fell deep in thought. If the police had investigated that thoroughly, there must be no mistake (her opinion changed completely). In that case, she should probably say that it had become difficult for Kyoko to find the culprit.

That left Mayumi's case. She couldn't understand why the police had so easily ruled it an accident. Or was there some reason they hadn't made public after all?

"It's unfair. Don't you think so?" Machiko said, poking at the ice in her iced coffee with a straw.

"What is?" Hideto Koyama asked, smiling.

The two of them were cooling off at a café after watching a movie. In the half-month since he'd saved her from being harassed by some delinquents, they'd already been on five or six dates.

"I mean, the famous detectives in novels can focus solely on the case, walking around or even flying off to foreign countries. But for me, I've got homework, reports, and even final exams. Even if I want to investigate something, I have to stay glued to my desk. At a rate like this, no detective could ever find the culprit."

Hideto laughed and said, "You're growing up fast."

"If I could, I'd love to."

"Your final exams are coming up soon, right?"

"Yeah. I'm so sick of it."

"And after that, there won't be any progress on the case, will there?"

"Yeah. But maybe that's for the best." Machiko said reluctantly. It was better for nothing to happen than for Haruko to die. "But it's frustrating that it might just end up being a cold case."

"Don't worry, the police aren't stupid."

"If only I could solve it myself..."

"Don't even think about it."

"Why not?"

"Well, I agree with you — I think the two cases are connected. But if that's the case, sticking your nose in there will put you in danger."

"Oh, so you're actually a little worried about me."

"Am I a bother?"

Machiko propped her chin on both hands and stared intently at Hideto, who was sitting across from her. I like this person, she thought. Machiko had had her heart set on members of the opposite sex a few times before. But this time, it felt somehow different. She wasn't a child anymore, and she understood the gravity of falling in love.

"...I'd like to meet your father sometime."

"My dad? Why"

"I always hear you praising him, so I'm curious what a wonderful man he is."

"Then come over today - oh, wait, Dad's in Osaka today. I think he'll be home next Sunday, though."

"What?"

"I'll definitely come by. But..."

"I'm a little worried. They say fathers tend to be suspicious of men who get close to their daughters."

"Oh, Dad's fine. He's very understanding." As she said this, Machiko felt her cheeks grow hot.

She suddenly imagined a scene where Hideto was saying to her father, "Please let me marry your daughter..."

Hideto Koyama was a third-year economics student at W University in Tokyo. Although his family was from Osaka, he had been living alone in Tokyo since high school, so he now seemed practically a Tokyo native. Machiko enjoyed her witty

conversations with Hideto and was pleased that he treated her like an adult. When they walked together, Machiko would sometimes playfully link her arm through his, but Hideto remained extremely gentlemanly. "This is a bit boring," Machiko thought to herself.

8. The Third Incident

As July began and final exams drew near, the atmosphere in the classroom grew quite hectic. That said, there weren't really any students who were the type to cram for exams. Everyone was just thinking, "I wish this would be over already," and what really had them worried was what to do with their summer vacation afterward.

Friends in the class had formed several groups and were making plans for trips and trips to the beach. Watching them poring over the timetable, drawing up itineraries, and chattering excitedly as they debated this and that, I thought that if they studied that hard, they'd surely all become top students.

Machiko, too, had received invitations from several groups — "Let's go to the highlands!" or "Why don't we go to the beach?" — but she hadn't replied.

For the time being, she was completely swamped with exam prep. These were her first exams since coming to this school. She didn't want to get bad grades and disappoint her father. Of course, Machiko was just as eager for the exams to be over. There were various things weighing on her mind.

As for Hideto, well, that was a different matter, but the murder case hadn't been solved at all. The students, too, no longer wanted to talk about the incident. They were laughing and running around as if nothing had happened. But for Machiko, that wasn't the case.

The one who was a bit of a mystery was Yukie. Machiko had assumed she'd be traveling all over the place with great enthusiasm, but she hadn't joined any group and simply said, "I'm not going anywhere in particular. I don't really like going out much."

It seemed to Machiko that this wasn't her true feelings, but she didn't think too deeply about it. Besides, it would be helpful to have her around when she did her own research during breaks.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, but "What do you mean?" was the reply.

Still, Yukie seemed to be troubled by something lately, and Machiko was concerned about it.

She pretended not to notice, but Yukie no longer had her usual cheerfulness; even during breaks, she would often stare blankly out the window, lost in thought. Machiko tried not to say anything, thinking that Yukie must have her own worries to deal with.

In any case, everything would be fine once the exams were over.

However, at that very moment, the next tragedy was quietly taking shape.

It was the night before the exams were set to begin. The heat, which had been the hottest of the year during the day, hadn't let up even by evening, making it incredibly muggy.

On her way home, she stopped by the library to look up some information, and when she returned around eight o’clock, her mother, Keiko, said, "We got a phone call a little while ago."
"From whom?"
"A girl named Ono."
"Haruko! What did she say?"
"Well, when I told her she hadn’t come home yet, she just said, 'In that case, never mind,’ and hung up."
A call from Haruko? What could it be about? Machiko was suddenly overcome with anxiety.
"What was she like?"
"What do you mean? Nothing in particular..."
"Did she sound as if in a rush or anything? Did you hear anything else?"
Keiko looked troubled. "I didn’t really notice anything..."
"Mom!" Machiko lunged for the phone.
The phone is ringing, but no one’s picking up. Even though it’s the day before the exam, she’s not home.
I wonder what it’s about. We’ve barely spoken lately, so why would she suddenly call? It might be nothing. But what if it’s something important...? Oh, forget it — the exam can wait!
Machiko called Yukie.
"Hello, Yukie?"
"Oh, Machiko, what’s up?"
"Just a little while ago, before I left, I got a call from Haruko. She didn’t say what it was about and just hung up, but when I called back just now, no one answered. I’m a little worried. I’m thinking of going over to her house."
"Got it. I’ll wait for you at the Koenji station platform."
The fact that she understood without a single complaint was one of Yukie’s best qualities. Machiko called out to her mother, "I’m heading out."
Any ordinary mother would have grumbled, "But you have an exam tomorrow," but Keiko simply said, "Call me if you’re going to be late."
She’s such a great mom - as she hurried down the stairs, Machiko thought to herself.

When Haruko realized Machiko wasn’t home, she put down the receiver and hesitated for a moment. Should she wait? It was too dangerous to do this alone. But this was originally a problem for the three of us. I have to solve this on my own, she reminded herself. I can’t wait any longer. I’m going to avenge Kyoko and Mayumi!
Haruko fetched the faculty and student directory, flipped through the pages, and found the name she was looking for. She opened the page, pressed it down firmly with her hand, and set the open directory next to the telephone stand.
She dialed the number, and a familiar voice answered.
"Hello?"
"Is that you, Professor? It’s Haruko Ono."

"Who is this?"
"You should know. I'm Haruko Ono — the one who was caught sneaking into the audiovisual room that time."
"Ah, Ms. Ono. I remember you."
"I need to talk to you."
"About what?"
"Please come to the back of the school gymnasium at 10 p.m. tonight."
The other person was silent for a moment, then laughed. "That's a pretty strange place to meet."
"Wouldn't you be the one in trouble if someone overheard us?"
"Why is that?"
"Because you killed Kyoko and Mayumi."
The other person fell silent. Haruko pressed on, "It's fine if you don't want to come. I'll just report it to the police. If the police investigate, they'll figure out the secret of that videotape right away."
"I don't really understand what you're talking about."
"Wait a moment."
"Okay."
"Then that's fine. I'm heading to the police station right now."
The man was silent for a moment, then said, "All right. Ten o'clock, right?"
Haruko placed the receiver back on the hook with trembling hands. She had finally done it. Haruko herself hadn't been confident in her vague hunch. But wasn't the very fact that he had agreed to come the best proof that her hunch was correct?
It was 7:40. I'd better be over there by nine. There's no way he'd show up that early. It's dark behind the gym, and it takes a while for your eyes to adjust. I'll lie in wait, and while he's wandering around in the dark, I'll tackle him.
Haruko had no intention of leaving the revenge for Kyoko and Mayumi to the police. Besides, there wasn't enough evidence to arrest him. At best, he'd be released due to insufficient evidence.
Haruko gently took the handkerchief-wrapped package from the back of the drawer, placed it on the desk, and unwrapped it. It was the large mountaineering knife she'd bought at the department store that afternoon. As she pulled it out of its leather sheath, the broad blade glinted dazzlingly silver.
Haruko was desperate. It had been her idea to sneak into that classroom in the first place, and the thought that her actions had led to the deaths of the other two had driven her to this resolve.
She knew full well that even if her target was a murderer, killing him wouldn't let her off scot-free. No matter what happened afterward, she wouldn't be satisfied until she had avenged them with her own hands.
Staring at the sharply gleaming blade, she felt anxious, wondering if she could really stab another person. But when she thought of the person who had cold-bloodedly reversed the car to run Kyoko over and dropped a heavy light fixture on Mayumi's head, her hesitation vanished.

Just in case, Haruko sat down at her desk and wrote a letter to Machiko. It was about the culprit and what they had seen in the audiovisual classroom. She believed Machiko would believe her.

"Machiko, I'm writing this in case anything happens to me. The person who killed Kyoko and Mayumi was..."

It was eight o'clock by the time she finished the letter.

"I should head out now."

She put the letter in an envelope, wrote "To Machiko Yuki" on the front, and placed it on the desk. Her parents weren't due home until midnight. It was some anniversary of a relative's death, so they wouldn't be back until midnight at the earliest. Maybe they'd even call to say, "We're staying over."

My hands were stained with ink, so I went into the bathroom and washed them at the sink. I took the opportunity to remove my glasses and set them aside, then washed my face. The cold water felt refreshing on my sweaty skin. I felt around for a towel, pressed it against my face, and took a deep breath. Just then, the phone rang in the hallway. It must be Machiko. I wondered what to do, but I couldn't very well not answer.

I wiped my face with the towel and looked in the mirror in front of me. Without my glasses, everything was blurry, but I saw something black moving behind me. I didn't even have time to turn around. A loop of thin rope slipped completely over Haruko's head and tightened with a sharp tug.

"Ah..."

Her voice faded away, strained and thin. Haruko felt the rope digging mercilessly into her neck. Her blurred vision grew darker and darker. Strangely, she felt no pain.

Looking down at Haruko lying on the tiled floor, the man was breathing heavily. He'd known he'd have to do it eventually, but being cornered so suddenly had made him panic. After hanging up on Haruko, he'd immediately raced over in his car. He'd wanted to kill her and make it look like suicide. He'd been anxious because he didn't know what Haruko was thinking. But, in any case, he'd made it in time. It was also lucky that he'd found the clothesline rope right away. Somehow, he'd managed to dispose of all three just as he'd planned.

The phone ringing in the hallway had stopped. It wasn't anything worth worrying about. Leaving Haruko's body where it was, the man stepped out into the hallway and searched her room. He'd come here assuming that since Haruko had been able to make a call like that, the rest of the family must be out, and his hunch had been correct. If he'd been wrong, it would have been a disaster.

The man wondered if Haruko had left behind anything resembling a letter. When he finally found her room, he felt a sense of relief. There was an envelope on the desk addressed to "Machiko Yuki." Upon seeing the name, the man seemed to flinch for some reason, but he quickly stuffed the envelope into his pocket. It was definitely worth looking. Next to it was a bundle wrapped in a handkerchief. He opened it casually and his eyes widened. A mountaineering knife. A terrifying thing. That

little brat, carrying something like this... He stuffed the knife into his pocket as well, then picked up the chair and returned to the bathroom.

Making it look like a suicide was a huge undertaking. Though she was petite, Haruko's limp body was terrifyingly heavy, and hoisting her onto the chair was no easy task. He tried to tie the end of the rope to the metal bracket holding the curtain rod to the ceiling, but it was an arduous task while holding the corpse.

Still, drenched in sweat, he finally managed to hang Haruko's body, tip the chair over onto the floor, and stage the scene of a suicide— but it took him nearly thirty minutes.

This was an apartment building; anyone could show up at any moment. There was no point in lingering. Just as he glanced around the bathroom to make sure he hadn't missed anything, he heard a voice at the front door.

"Haruko! Are you there?"

Machiko and Yukie, who had met up in Koenji, hurried from Kichijoji Station to Haruko's house. Sweat was beading on my forehead and running down my back, and my blouse was sticking to my skin, making me feel uncomfortable, but I couldn't afford to worry about such things.

"I hope I'm just overthinking this..." Honestly, once they got there, Haruko might just come out and say, "What's going on?" in surprise. I hoped that's exactly what would happen.

As I stood at the entrance about to ring the doorbell, Yukie said,

"The front door is open."

Sure enough, the front door was left slightly ajar. I pushed it open gently and peeked inside. "Haruko! Are you there?" I called out. There was no answer.

"I wonder if she's not home?" Yukie peered inside as well.

"It's strange that she'd leave it open like that."

"I suppose so..."

"Let's go inside."

The two of them entered the foyer, took off their shoes, and stepped inside.

"Where's Haruko's room?"

"It's at the end of this hallway."

The two of them walked down the hallway. Along the way, Machiko stopped by the phone and said,

"Hey, Yukie, look."

"What? That book? What is it? It's the school directory."

"That's right, it's the one everyone has."

"I wonder if she was looking at it because she was going to call you?"

"No, that's not it. Look, the page is open and pressed down. It's the page with the teachers' addresses and phone numbers."

"I wonder if she was calling a teacher?"

"I wonder which one," Machiko said, holding the directory. "Anyway, let's go to her room."

Upon entering Haruko’s room, Machiko was struck by a slightly odd feeling. It was incredibly tidy. The last time she’d been there, the room had seemed rather cluttered, but today it was remarkably organized and neat. On the desk lay a ballpoint pen and a pad of stationery.

She flipped through the pages, but the stationery was blank.

"Haruko!" She called out again.

"Let’s check the other rooms."

After going through the living room, dining room, and kitchen, the two of them arrived at the bathroom. Yukie, who peeked inside first, let out a short scream. Stunned, the two of them stood frozen at the entrance, staring for a moment at Haruko, who was hanging there.

Machiko finally managed to dial 911. Yukie had collapsed and was sitting in the hallway by the front door. Machiko suddenly felt all her strength drain away, and she collapsed beside her.

"We have to get her down," Yukie said, but Machiko shook her head. It was clear she was dead, and Machiko simply couldn’t bear the thought of going any further.

"Do you think it’s suicide?" Yukie asked.

"I don’t know... We didn’t find a suicide note."

"That’s awful..."

"Yeah. Do you think it’s possible she was murdered?"

"I think so. I have a feeling that might be the case."

Yukie turned her face away and looked toward the entrance, but suddenly furrowed her brow.

"Hey, Machiko."

"What?"

"Are you sure?"

"The door... it’s slightly ajar... I closed it properly when I came in."

Machiko and Yukie exchanged glances. Machiko turned her gaze back to the entrance and gasped.

"The shoes!"

"Huh?"

"The shoes! When we came in, there were a pair of men’s leather shoes sitting in the corner. They’re gone."

"Of course! They were just ordinary black shoes, but they were lined up so neatly in the corner that they caught my eye. Now they’re gone."

"What does that mean?"

"Who?"

"Someone was here. They left while we were in Haruko’s room."

They didn’t need to ask; they both knew. When they had arrived, the murderer had been hiding in the bathroom.

Even Machiko felt a chill run down her spine. The two of them instinctively huddled together and shivered.

They remained huddled together, motionless, until the sound of a police siren drew near.

9. The Conclusion

"I never thought you'd get so deeply involved in this case," her father, Shozo, said with a grim expression.

"I'm sorry," Machiko said, slowly sinking into the seat.

It was already two in the morning. The police questioning had ended, and she was on her way home in a taxi with her father, who had come to pick her up.

"For now, the final exams starting tomorrow — no, starting today — are canceled. "As soon as we get home, I'll call the principal right away."

Machiko still felt as if she were in a dream. Three girls her own age had died right under her nose. And all three had been murdered by someone. Although the police didn't seem to think so.

"That girl did a terrible thing," Shozo shook his head. "Losing two friends in a row must have been a huge shock for her."

"Dad, do you really think it was suicide?"

"That's what the police are saying, isn't it?"

"But..."

"Do you still think all three were killed by the same person?"

"Yes," Machiko said stubbornly. "I mean, it's three people. It's impossible for such incidents to happen one after another by coincidence."

"No, no, think about it. That was just a one-time coincidence. The first daughter was deliberately run over by someone. That much is true. I'm sure some boy must have held a grudge against her. The police will find the culprit eventually. Then, by chance, her best friend died after being hit in the head by a falling light fixture. That is certainly a rare coincidence. But there are even rarer coincidences in this world. And the third daughter committed suicide on impulse, overcome by the shock of losing two best friends in a row. This isn't a coincidence at all. It's a death with a proper reason — though it might sound strange to call it 'proper' - Are you still not convinced?'"

Hearing Dad say that, I started to feel like he might be right. But, Machiko thought- "No! That's not it!"

There are plenty of reasons why it wasn't like that. First of all, Haruko didn't leave a suicide note. It's unthinkable for a young girl to commit suicide without writing a note. The only reason anyone would believe that is because the police officer was a man and an old man. And what about the fact that the shoes Machiko saw were gone, and the front door was open? Machiko and Yukie had tried their hardest to point these things out at the police station, but they were brushed off — told that someone in a state of mental confusion wouldn't notice such details, that it was all just a figment of their imagination. Well, they didn't say it so bluntly, but it was clear the police weren't taking their story seriously.

Besides, Machiko had noticed one more strange thing. Haruko's glasses were sitting on the sink. Why would someone go to the trouble of taking off their glasses just to commit suicide?

Taken one by one, they were just trivial fragments, but when pieced together, they formed the word "murder" like a jigsaw puzzle.

Machiko said nothing. She didn't think the police were any help, and her father, in his position as a school board member, would surely want to believe Haruko had committed suicide. She had no choice but to remain silent.

"But," Machiko murmured softly, so her father — who was deep in thought — wouldn't hear her, "I won't leave it at that. I'll get to the bottom of this, no matter what."

The next day at school was in an uproar. The final exams were postponed until after summer vacation, and it was announced that summer vacation would begin today. The school administration was concerned that the succession of student deaths would unsettle the other students.

The minds of the younger generation are unstable, maintained by a delicate balance. The school feared, in particular, that Haruko's suicide might trigger a chain reaction.

Mr. Kurabayashi's anguish was so palpable that even Machiko found it painful to watch. With three deaths in his own class — one of them a suicide — the supervising teacher's responsibility was naturally called into question. However, neither the principal nor the school board attempted to hold Mr. Kurabayashi accountable in any way. The students, too, felt nothing but sympathy for him; there was not a single voice of criticism.

But for Mr. Kurabayashi himself, that offered no comfort whatsoever.

All the students were gathered in the auditorium. With a somber expression, Principal Tezuka stood on the stage, offered words of condolence for Haruko Ono's death, and then announced that summer vacation would begin today.

"I want all of you to take this time off to think deeply about the value of human life. We will be thinking about it too. The teachers and the board members as well." As she listened, Machiko hoped the moralizing wouldn't drag on and on. That would be the last straw. Fortunately, however, the principal wrapped up his speech quickly, "Finally, I have one more request. This morning, I received a letter of resignation from Mr. Kurabayashi, the homeroom teacher of the three students who passed away."

The students erupted in a murmur. Mr. Kurabayashi stood at the edge of the stage with the other teachers, his face frozen in a stiff expression.

"I asked him to reconsider," the principal continued. "However, it seems his resolve is quite firm. So I have a request for all of you. I want you all to try to persuade Mr. Kurabayashi to stay."

Applause erupted throughout the auditorium. Everyone stood up, clapping and cheering. It felt as though the auditorium itself was shaking.

The principal walked over to Mr. Kurabayashi and took a white envelope out of his inner pocket. As the noise died down and all the students watched, the principal asked,

"Mr. Kurabayashi, it's okay if I tear up this resignation letter, isn't it?"

"Yes..." Ms. Kurabayashi was crying.

When the principal tore the resignation letter in two, the applause erupted again with twice the intensity. Amid the commotion, Machiko felt a stinging heat well up in

her eyes. Everyone in the class was crying. She glanced at Yukie next to her — it was clear this was far worse than what Machiko was feeling. Yukie had buried her face in her hands and was sobbing uncontrollably. Machiko was taken a little by surprise.

"Haruko’s diary?"
"Yes - I’m sorry to bring this up at a time like this."
"No, not at all. If we had something like that, we might understand a little better why she did such a thing... But I’m afraid I don’t think she kept a diary. She wasn’t the type to be that meticulous."
"Is that so?"
"But if you’d like, why don’t you look through her desk? You might find something."
"Is that all right?"
"Yes. It’s too painful for us, so we haven’t touched any of her things. They’re still just as they were, so please go ahead."
"I’m sorry."
Haruko’s mother, her face bearing a lonely smile and eyes swollen from crying, gave a slight nod and returned to her seat at the funeral.
Machiko walked down the hallway and entered Haruko’s room. The room was exactly as it had been when she’d found Haruko’s body. Machiko prayed that Haruko had left behind something — anything — that might serve as a clue.
She felt a twinge of guilt about opening the drawers, as if she were doing something wrong to the deceased Haruko, but she murmured to herself, "Please forgive me — I’m doing this to find the culprit."
She searched through the drawers one by one, but couldn’t find a diary. Disappointed that it might be a waste of time, Machiko still couldn’t bring herself to give up, so she flipped through the few notebooks she had in her hands.
She was taken aback when she flipped through her Math IIB notebook. Only about the first third of the notebook had been used, but there were some notes on the last few pages.
At first, she thought they were calculation notes because they were just a series of numbers, but upon closer inspection, that wasn’t the case.
"2–1 Asada 3000... 3_7 Nagai 2500... Oh, I see."
It was like that — what appeared to be dates and the names of classmates.
She had been keeping track of the income from her side job doing homework for others. As I looked through it, I was surprised to see just how well her business was doing. There were even names from other classes and students who seemed to be from other grades. I don’t know how much she was paying the University of Tokyo student who actually did the homework, but it seemed to be quite a substantial income.
After scanning the page to the very end, Machiko gasped in surprise. The note ended with the entry she herself had requested — the record of the day Mayumi died — but in the margin below, something had been scribbled in messy handwriting.

"The deaths of Kyoko and Mayumi. The cassette in the audiovisual classroom? The secret lies in the picture and the jewel inside the cassette."
And at the very bottom, in bold letters,
"Revenge!"
was written.
The audiovisual classroom - Machiko felt as though she had heard something about the audiovisual classroom from Haruko, and she fell deep in thought. She was sure they had been talking here when... That's it! On the day Mayumi died, they had been talking just before the call came from Mayumi's house.
"I snuck into the audiovisual classroom and got caught," Haruko said. Then she added, "You have to promise to keep this a secret." Before Machiko could ask for more details, a call came in from Mayumi's house.
"Cassette" probably refers to a video cassette. But what could "pictures and jewels" mean? Is there really a cassette that contains such things? Haruko wrote that there is a "secret" there. And then there's the word "revenge" at the end...
There is no doubt that this revenge refers to the murder of Kyoko and Mayumi. If so, did Haruko know who the culprit was?
"Why didn't she write down that name for me?" Machiko murmured aloud without thinking.
As she returned to her seat at the funeral with the notebook in hand, the students' incense offerings were already drawing to a close.
As the hearse carrying the coffin began to move slowly through the scorching sunlight, another wave of sobbing spread among the students seeing her off. With her cheerful personality, Haruko had been loved by everyone.
...Haruko. I will definitely carry out your revenge for you. Machiko spoke those words to the line of cars driving off into the distance.

Part 2: An Adventure on a Summer Day

1. Mr. Kurabayashi's Secret

It's been quite a while since the term "multitaskers" was all the rage. Nobody calls them that anymore, but it's not because the "multitaskers" have disappeared — it's because everyone has become one.
Even Machiko can manage to do her English homework while listening to the stereo through headphones, stuffing a piece of cake into her mouth at the same time, and planning tomorrow's schedule in her head.
However, this summer vacation was a different story. Trying to juggle homework, a murder investigation, and romance all at once was a bit too much even for Machiko. Whispering words of love while flipping through a dictionary with her right hand, holding a pistol in her left, gently tapping out dance steps with her right

foot, and chasing the murderer with her left — if she could do that, she'd be a shape-shifting yokai.

In that case, the best strategy to focus fully on one thing was to tackle the task that seemed most likely to be finished quickly first. So, when considering which of these three she could wrap up, both the murder investigation and the romance involved real people, so they didn't seem likely to resolve themselves exactly as she wished. That left her homework. Normally, I'd rush to finish it all in the last three days of summer vacation, but this time I resolved to get it done in the first three days — or so you might think.

The reason is that I did, in fact, get started. However, after translating just three lines of the first page of my English-to-Japanese translation, a thought suddenly crossed my mind. What if, while investigating a murder case, I were to fall victim to the killer and meet a pitiful, fleeting end? All this hard work on my homework, all the effort I put into studying for exams — wouldn't it all be for nothing?

If that's the case, I'd better wait until the investigation is over, the culprit is caught, and I'm absolutely certain my homework won't be wasted. No, I absolutely must do that. Machiko had reached this extremely logical conclusion.

So, what should I do for now? She was supposed to have Hideto over next Sunday, and it looked like Shozo would finally be home that day. She had to make preparations for that.

"I'll do the cooking!" Having declared this to her parents, she couldn't back out now. Machiko wasn't exactly good at cooking. To be specific, she was a master at heating up instant ramen, but...

"Go to the bookstore and buy a cookbook." Machiko jotted this down on a scrap of paper on her desk. Then she continued, writing down things like "Clean the room. Throw away last year's calendar. Organize the bookshelf. Organize the photo albums" — enough to easily fill three years' worth of work under normal circumstances. Staring at the calendar (this year's), she pondered when she should tackle each task. However, there's a world of difference between making plans in your head and actually carrying them out. She decided to stop at just making plans for today.

Now, on to the case. Where should she start? For the time being, all Machiko had in her hands were the cassette tape of "Pictures and Gems" — which Haruko had left behind and which apparently came from the audiovisual classroom — and those two cards with Professor Kurabayashi's cryptic mutterings. But I still have no idea how these connect to the case.

Machiko decided to try meeting Professor Kurabayashi first.

2:00 p.m. It was the height of the heat. After getting off at Musashi-Koganei Station, she started walking slowly to avoid breaking a sweat as much as possible.

It really is hot, though. Osaka was hot too, but the heat in Tokyo is unique. And while it's bearable around here in Koganei, the heat in the city center is relentless—you can't escape it even under the shade of a tree. If you want to cool off, your only option is to go into a coffee shop, but they crank the air conditioning up to full blast, trying to get customers to leave as quickly as possible. So, when you can't stand it

anymore and step outside, the stifling heat clings to you. It’s like going back and forth between a refrigerator and an oven — even the freshest young person would go crazy.

Machiko isn’t usually one to sweat much, but after walking just a short distance, she could already feel her skin becoming clammy with sweat. "I really messed this up..."

She should have asked the professor to meet her at a coffee shop near the station. Talking in a cool place versus talking while wilting in the heat, like two boiled octopuses, makes a world of difference in how your mind works. A famous detective can’t be like this. Pull yourself together!

Agatha Christie’s famous detective Poirot was also no match for seasickness or the dentist, she told herself encouragingly, as she finally arrived near the address she was looking for.

After asking a neighbor, she finally found an apartment building with the cool-sounding name "Seisen-so." It was a cramped, two-story concrete building that, no matter how she looked at it, had absolutely nothing to do with a "pure spring." The room was "202," so it must be on the second floor. As she climbed the steep iron staircase, a newspaper headline flashed briefly through Machiko’s mind.

"High School Girl Murdered by Teacher! — Attacked in Teacher’s Apartment" If that happened, would the media think I’d visited the apartment with some strange ulterior motive?

"You’re overthinking it," she said aloud, as if to convince herself.

Just then, a woman carrying a baby on her back and holding a shopping basket came down the narrow hallway.

"Excuse me, where is Professor Kurabayashi’s room?"

"Oh, if you’re looking for the teacher, it’s the second door from the back."

"Thank you."

"I don’t think he’s home right now, though. I saw him leaving just a little while ago."

"Is that so..."

It was a mistake not to call first — she’d figured she’d get the real story if she just showed up unannounced — but still, to have trudged all the way out here in this heat only to find him away. Machiko was devastated.

"But you know," the woman continued, "he’ll probably be back soon, won’t he? His wife is here, so why don’t you ask her?"

Machiko was taken aback and stood there for a moment. His wife? Dr. Kurabayashi has a wife? Was she mistaking him for someone else?

The second door from the back. Sure enough, a nameplate reading "Kurabayashi" was hanging there. I took a deep breath, straightened my back, and rang the doorbell. Who knows what’s going to come out — a demon or a snake? Surely the landlady isn’t going to come out carrying a snotty-nosed kid and a screaming baby on her back, is she? No matter what, I don’t want my fantasy shattered that much.

"Coming!"

A young woman’s voice rang out, and the door opened.

"Oh..."

"Oh..."
Both of them were so stunned they couldn’t speak. To her surprise, Machiko found herself face to face with Yukie.
"...W-welcome,"
Yukie stammered.

"You’d better explain this properly!"
Machiko said sternly. Yukie, wearing an apron, sat there, shrinking into herself.
"Until this very moment, I thought of you as my best friend. What do you mean you didn’t tell me anything? Don’t you trust me? Is that it? Is that how it is? I get it now. From this moment on, you and I aren’t friends or anything like that, so just keep that in mind!"
"Now, now, Yuki, just hear me out."
Mr. Kurabayashi, who had been listening with a look of utter bewilderment, stepped in. He’d just gone out to buy cigarettes, but when he returned, this was the scene he found.
"You stay out of this, Mr. Kurabayashi!" Machiko snapped, and Mr. Kurabayashi’s eyes widened as he clamped his mouth shut.
"This is between the two of us!" She turned back to Yukie. "When on earth did you get married?"
"Six months ago..."
"Does anyone else know?"
"No one."
"Really?"
"Really. Not even the teachers. Except for the principal and the administrative staff."
"Absolutely?"
"Absolutely."
"Today is July 18th..."
Machiko thought for a moment. "I don’t get my allowance until the end of the month."
Yukie looked puzzled. "...Machiko."
"So, I’ll give you a wedding gift next month. Is that okay?"
"Don’t get too familiar with me. Mrs. Kurabayashi."
Machiko said this and started giggling. Yukie joined in and started laughing too. Standing nearby, Professor Kurabayashi let out a sigh of relief.
"Professor," Machiko said. "As hush money, chocolate parfaits!"
After walking out into the heat to the station and entering the parlor, all three of them finally settled down.
"We didn’t plan on getting married this soon either," Professor Kurabayashi said, wiping his flushed face with a cold wet towel. "At the very least, we intended to wait until Yukie graduated from school. But then, when I went back to the countryside late last year, my parents — who knew nothing about it — were waiting with a potential match they’d arranged for me. Even though I had no intention of getting married, I felt bad for the other person, so I told them about Yukie. However, since I’d always used that kind of made-up story to dodge marriage talk in the past, my

parents didn’t believe me. So they told me to bring her along. I had no choice but to come back to Tokyo on New Year’s Eve and go to Yukie’s house. "Her parents were pretty shocked, too. But I managed to get them to understand, and we hurried back to the countryside with Yukie."

"On New Year’s Day," Yukie said.

"Fortunately, my parents took a liking to her as well. But they liked her so much that they insisted we get married right away. I told them it was way too soon — after all, she was a student in the class I taught — but they wouldn’t listen. My mother even said, 'I got married when I was sixteen,’ you know." "So what did you do?"

"Well, I had no choice, so after I came to Tokyo, I went to talk to the principal..."

"Wait a minute," Machiko interrupted.

"That sounds kind of vague. Aren’t you leaving something out?"

"No... that's not true, is it?"

"Yeah..."

"Yukie, are you still keeping secrets from me? If that's what you're planning—"

"O-okay, fine!" Yukie said hurriedly. "Look... I went over there for New Year's, right? So, I stayed at their house for three days. But both of their parents were trying to get us married as soon as possible... and, well, on the third night, they just laid out our futons in the same room. We couldn’t just move to another room on our own, and the hallway was freezing..."

"I had a few drinks with my dad. Apparently, that was part of their plan too..."

"So, well... that’s the story."

"What do you mean, 'that’s the story’?" Machiko grumbled. "This is just making me even more angry."

"The principal laughed it off and forgave us, and he even acted as our matchmaker."

"But Yukie, why are you in Koenji?"

"It’s kind of inconvenient until I finish high school, isn’t it? So I only come over here on weekends."

Is this what they call "progressive"...? Yukie, whom I’d always thought was more old-fashioned than me. "Oh man, I’m beat," Machiko thought, shocked. Oh right, I almost forgot to ask the most important thing.

Machiko asked Mr. Kurabayashi about the incident with him muttering in the auditorium.

"Yeah, Yukie asked me about that too. But I don’t really remember it myself. I wonder why I said something like that... I think it probably meant I was taking responsibility for the two deaths."

"Is that so... That’s disappointing. But, Professor, what were you doing in the English Club room at that time?"

"Oh, that! Well, your powers of observation are impressive. I think you have the makings of a great detective."

"You know, Machiko, I’m probably going to get scolded again for this..."

"What?"

"I was there at the time." Machiko looked back and forth between the two of them, dumbfounded. Mr. Kurabayashi hurriedly said, "No, but please don’t get any

strange ideas. We weren't doing anything strange. I would never do such a thing in this sacred school."

"I didn't say anything."

"I just had a little discussion about our household finances," Yukie said. "Then I heard footsteps, and I never thought it would be Machiko and the others. Since I'm not even a member of the English Club, I thought it would be bad if they found the two of us there, so I hid behind the bookshelf in the back."

Ugh, I feel like such an idiot. I didn't come here just to be subjected to all their lovey-dovey nonsense. I came here intending to uncover a crucial clue to the murder case. After parting ways at the station, Machiko watched the two of them walking side by side and muttered to herself repeatedly. If there were a magazine called *Weekly Tezuka*, I'd pitch an article titled "Exclusive! Professor Kurabayashi Has a Seventeen-Year-Old Wife!"

The ride home was long. Waiting on the platform, she was kept waiting endlessly by express trains, special rapid trains, and freight trains passing by. When the train to Tokyo finally arrived, it was packed, had no air conditioning, and to top it all off, it got stuck partway due to a door malfunction—absolutely nothing went right. But Machiko's gloomy expression wasn't just because of that. - Professor Kurabayashi and Yukie. She was feeling a little jealous of that unexpected—yet surprisingly well-matched—pair.

Oh well, I have Hideto, too. That's right, I have to buy a cookbook.

On her way home, Machiko immediately took a detour to stop by a bookstore.

I had a mountain of cookbooks. But after searching for about an hour, I came to the conclusion that dishes that are easy enough for even a novice to make, taste delicious, look fancy, and are perfect for summer are, after all, hard to come by.

2. An Unexpected Face

"I'm Hideto Koyama."

"Hello, I'm Machiko's father. Please, make yourself comfortable."

"Will do."

The two of them sat on the sofa, looking somewhat awkward, but eventually Hideto spoke up. "You seem to be very busy with work."

"Well, I manage. What department were you in again?"

"Economics."

"I see. So, are you perhaps interested in a career in international trade?"

"Yes! If possible, I'd like to go into that field in the future." Hidetoshi said this with a slightly obvious enthusiasm. Even so, Shozo looked pleased and began talking about the current state of the trade industry. Machiko, who had been quietly eavesdropping by the doorway, finally breathed a sigh of relief and dashed off to the kitchen.

"Mom, is everything ready?"

"I'm working on it right now. Why don't you serve them something cold?"

"Okay." Today, Machiko was wearing a stylish Cardan apron, giving her a distinctly young-wife look. That said, Keiko had taken full charge of the cooking.
"She’s quite a handsome girl, isn’t she?"
"Is she?"
Machiko poured chilled soda into a tumbler, placed it on a tray, and hurried off to the parlor. The two men were still engaged in some sort of trade discussion, but when Machiko entered, Shozo’s eyes widened.
"Well, isn’t this a rare sight. You, who never even makes a cup of tea."
Machiko glared at her father. Hideto, on the other hand, was grinning. "Dad’s just so clueless!"
"He’s a good father, isn’t he?"
"Really? He’s always putting me down, so I got mad."

The two of them were walking toward the station. It must have been around 9:30 by then. A light breeze had picked up, feeling refreshing against their flushed cheeks.
"You’ll come visit again, won’t you?"
"As long as you don’t mind me, sure."
"Of course!"
"Why don’t we go to the beach sometime? I’ll borrow a friend’s car."
"Just the two of us?"
"Is that a problem?"
"Not at all," Machiko said quickly. "When are we going?"
"Sometime next week. I’ll call you. I have to check when I can take time off from my part-time job first."
"I’ll be waiting."
"You’re hopeless."
Hideto worked part-time as a tutor at a cram school.
Machiko felt her heart flutter. Just the two of them at the beach - how wonderful!
"By the way, what about that murder case?"
Machiko told him about Professor Kurabayashi and Yukie.
"The only clue left is the cassette with the "pictures and jewels" mentioned in Haruko’s note.
"Is there something in the audiovisual classroom? But school’s out, so it’s probably closed all the time, right?"
"There’s a summer seminar. For third-year students preparing for entrance exams."
"Entrance exams, huh. Poor things, not even getting a break during summer vacation."
"I know - those classes run through the end of July. I’ll go check out the audiovisual room."
"That’s fine, but you have to be careful. Even if you find something, you can’t do anything until you contact me first."
"I will."
"Promise me."
"I promise."
Hideto stopped and said, "Oh, we’ve come this far. Will you be okay walking home?"

"There are people around."
"But there are a lot of drunks out there, so I'll walk you home."
"Then there's no point in you walking me this far," Machiko said with a laugh.
"It's fine!"
The two of them retraced their steps back toward the apartment building.
"See you later."
On the first floor of the building, in front of the elevator, Hideto said, "I had a great time tonight."
"Me too."
"Say hi to your dad for me - oh, the elevator's here."
"Hey, can I ask you a favor?"
"What is it?"
"Give me a goodnight kiss." Machiko blushed bright red and pointed to her cheek. Hideto smiled and said,
"Okay, close your eyes." Machiko turned her right cheek toward him and closed her eyes. Just as she felt his hand touch her cheek, his lips touched hers. After a moment's hesitation, Machiko took a deep breath and threw her arms around him. His arms held her tight...
When their lips parted and she opened her eyes, she saw Hideto's smile.
"Are you mad?"
"Not at all!"
Machiko flew out of Hideto's arms like a bird taking flight and stepped into the elevator.
"Good night!" Machiko said.
Through the gap in the closing doors, she could see Hideto waving. As the elevator began to rise slowly, Machiko leaned against the wall and caught her breath.
My first kiss! Has there ever been a day this wonderful?
"With this," Machiko said to herself, "I've closed the gap a little, Yukie."

Even though it's my turn next year, the third-year students really are to be pitied. Machiko thought as she walked into the school. Normally, they'd be able to relax during summer break, but they have summer classes all through July, and even after August begins, there's a special course starting on the 10th that they have to attend. The latter one isn't mandatory, but since everyone else is taking it, she can't very well be the only one who doesn't.
That said, this is a girls' high school, so there's not a trace of the cutthroat atmosphere of the college entrance exam war; everyone comes out in a relaxed, almost playful mood. It's almost as if they come just for the fun of making a detour on the way home. The summer classes for seniors end at 2:00 p.m. It's now 1:15 p.m. There probably isn't a soul around the audiovisual classroom.
Walking through the building in front of me, it's pleasantly cool inside thanks to the air conditioning, but the moment I open the glass door and step out onto the connecting corridor, the heat hits me like a wall. Ah, I just want to jump into a pool!

The door to the audiovisual room wasn’t even locked. Desks were arranged in rows, and there were two large TVs at the front. Machiko walked through the classroom and entered the console room at the back.

Since this console room stored film and tapes, it was air-conditioned and cool. Relieved, she took a moment to cool off before scanning the titles of the cassette tapes lined up on the shelves one by one.

"I don’t see anything that looks like what I’m looking for."

"Looking for something?"

If it were a cassette with some kind of secret, it wouldn’t be lined up in a place like this. Or perhaps it would have a title that didn’t look like it at all...

A sudden voice made Machiko nearly jump out of her skin. Mr. Nishida, the art teacher, was standing there, pipe in mouth, smiling.

"Oh, Mr. Nishida, I’m sorry. I just kind of wandered in here..."

"It’s fine. There’s nothing here that’s going to break. Are you looking for something?"

"No, not really. I was just wondering what kind of tapes they had..."

"You won’t find anything interesting. They’re all educational programs. They should put in a movie every once in a while."

"That would be nice."

"Well, porn or the occult might be a bit inappropriate," he laughed. "Oh, right. The other day, Mr. Misawa from music put in a recording of a concert. Want to give it a listen?"

"Yes!"

Mr. Nishida took out one of the cassettes and loaded it into the deck. The tape featured a performance by a young French pianist. Machiko wasn’t particularly knowledgeable about classical music. However, the pianist was quite handsome, so she found it interesting. These days, people listen to classical music based on how it makes them feel. The piece seemed to be by Chopin or something like that. Mr. Nishida was sitting in a chair a short distance away, listening, but suddenly, as if he’d just realized something, "You were in the same class as the late Mayumi Yanagida, weren’t you?"

Machiko was suddenly snapped back to reality. "Yes."

"Yanagida played the piano too, didn’t she?" Mr. Nishida said in a wistful tone. "Professor Misawa told me she was quite a talented girl - it’s such a pity what happened to her."

"Yes, it is." Machiko had heard from someone in her class that when Mr. Nishida was young, he had considerable talent in music as well, and after agonizing over whether to pursue art or music, he ultimately chose art.

"You still play the piano, don’t you, Mr. Nishida?"

"That was a long time ago. I don’t play at all anymore."

A shadow suddenly crossed Mr. Nishida’s gentle face. Although he had chosen art, he couldn’t really say he had succeeded in the end. Machiko wondered if, even now, he might still harbor lingering regrets about what might have been had he chosen music back then.

"We’ve had a string of unfortunate incidents this semester, haven’t we?"

"Yes."

"But dying young isn't such a bad thing. Dying at the very moment when you're brimming with hope and dreams for the future — that might actually be a kind of happiness."

"I suppose so..." Machiko gave a vague reply. She never expected to hear words like that come out of Mr. Nishida's mouth. The Mr. Nishida she usually knew — cheerful and friendly with his students — was nowhere to be seen.

Suddenly, Machiko felt a sense of fear. Mr. Nishida and I were alone together in this classroom right now. Why on earth had Mr. Nishida come to a place like this? His home was in Mitaka, after all, and the summer courses were supposed to cover only the subjects necessary for college entrance exams — there shouldn't be any art classes.

What had brought Mr. Nishida here? Especially since he'd appeared as soon as Machiko entered the audiovisual classroom, as if he'd been following her. Had he been watching this place all along?

Machiko's gaze fell on Mr. Nishida's shoes. They were black leather shoes, slightly whitened by dust. They were cheap, run-of-the-mill shoes. Could these be the shoes that vanished from Haruko's front door back then?

"What's scarier than death," Mr. Nishida continued, "is living without hope. Worse than that is living while knowing you're wasting your own life - indeed..."

On the TV screen, white, supple fingers were dancing across the keyboard. Machiko felt as if a heavy spotlight were about to fall on the pianist's head.

"I, too, sometimes hate myself. I brood over why I did such a thing. No matter how much I think about it, there's no going back now." Machiko thought Mr. Nishida was speaking to himself. As if she didn't exist at all, his eyes were fixed intently on a distant point. For a moment, she felt a chill. She felt as though she had seen something strange in those eyes.

Mr. Nishida? No way! There's just no way Mr. Nishida would kill someone...

"Professor Nishida." A voice called out from the classroom entrance. When she turned around, Principal Tezuka was standing there, dressed in a proper navy suit despite the heat. Professor Nishida turned to look at the principal and, in an instant, his expression returned to its usual gentle demeanor.

"Ah, Principal."

"A music recital?" The principal smiled as he entered. "I'd like to join the audience."

"Certainly. But the admission fee is quite steep," Mr. Nishida said with a laugh.

"Well, well," the principal said, looking at Machiko. "Isn't this Yuki-kun's daughter?"

"Hello."

"Mr. Nishida, please take good care of this student. She's the daughter of Director Yuki, our school's major patron."

"Is that so! I had no idea. In that case, I should have made a better pitch. Like asking her father to give me a raise, for example."

The three of them burst out laughing. But was it just Machiko's imagination that their laughter sounded somewhat distant and forced...?

3. Lovers

The emerald-green sea of Minami-Izu, almost green, reflected the blazing white sun with a dazzling glare.

Colorful swimsuits, the girls' shrieks of delight, the pure white sparkle of splashing water, a crowd of wet, glossy, tanned skin...

The ocean is wonderful! Summer is wonderful!

"Why don't you take a little break?"

"Yeah, I will." Hideto, having just come out of the water, sat down on the sand, panting slightly. Machiko gazed at Hideto's young, supple, and toned body with a sense of awe. He looked slim when he was dressed, but he had such a muscular, impressive build.

"Do you play any sports?"

"I played basketball in high school. These days, joining a club seems like too much trouble."

"You're actually pretty strong. I've got to admit, I've changed my mind about you."

"Thanks," Hideto smiled. "You're lovely, too."

"I'm not good enough," Machiko said, her cheeks flushing slightly. "I'm fat, and I have a bad figure."

"That's not true at all!"

Machiko was wearing a bright orange two-piece swimsuit. She didn't tan easily, so her fair skin had a smooth, porcelain-like sheen. Hideto gazed at her slender, white legs.

"Don't stare so much." Machiko curled up, wrapping her arms around her legs.

"Hiding such beauty is a sin against humanity."

"You're exaggerating." Machiko smiled and looked up at the dazzling blue sky above her. "But the weather is wonderful. This really feels like summer..."

Since it was a weekday, there weren't many people around. Most of the visitors were young couples or groups of friends; there were few families.

"Excuse me!" A beach ball rolled toward their feet.

A girl in a bikini ran over, caught the ball Hideto had thrown, and ran back.

Machiko suddenly remembered something and said,

"I had a ball returned to me, too."

"That's right."

"What were you doing in a place like that back then?"

"I had a friend at H University who was living in a boarding house near there. I was on my way back from visiting him."

"You didn't even glance at me, did you?"

"That's not true. I thought you were cute and just couldn't take my eyes off you."

"Did I?" Machiko laughed. "Never mind that, but you shouldn't look at other girls like that now."

"Compared to you, other girls are..."

"Oh, the way you were looking at that girl in the bikini just now was anything but casual." Machiko teased him.

"Should we head out soon?"
"Oh, already?" Machiko said, sounding a bit put out.
"How about we rest for a bit at a nearby hotel, grab dinner, and then head home?"
"That sounds wonderful! I'm all for it!" She said that, then suddenly looked worried. "But, resting at a hotel... you don't mean..."
"You're such a fool. Don't read too much into it," Hideto said with a laugh. Machiko laughed along with him, though she felt a little disappointed inside.

It was already around 10 p.m. when Hideto pulled the car over just a short distance before Machiko's apartment building. The traffic on the way home had been heavy, and since it had gotten late, they'd stopped for a cup of coffee along the way.
"Aren't you going to drive me all the way to my apartment?" Machiko asked, looking puzzled.
"Later," Hideto said, turning off the engine.
Before Machiko knew it, she was in Hideto's arms. Closing her eyes as she received a gentle kiss on her lips, she felt her whole body grow hot as if on fire. The pounding of her heart echoed all the way to her head.
What's going to happen now? I don't want it to go any further! Any further than this...
Hideto suddenly pulled away and leaned back against the seat. He took a deep breath. Frowning, he looked as if he were silently enduring something painful.
"...What's wrong?" Machiko asked, worried.
"It's nothing," he said, shaking his head.
"Are you mad? Did I do something to make you mad?"
Hideto smiled and said, "You're a good girl."
"Don't treat me like a kid by calling me a 'good girl,'" Machiko pouted slightly. "I'm an adult now, you know."
"Sorry, sorry," Hideto laughed.
Hideto started the car and pulled up in front of the apartment building.
"Well, actually..."
"By the way, what happened at the audiovisual classroom?"
Machiko told him what had happened in the audiovisual classroom.
"I told you not to tell me — I said you shouldn't do anything," Hideto said with a bitter expression. "If that teacher was the culprit, you might have been killed too."
"I'm sorry..."
"So, what are you going to do now?"
"I don't know. Anyway, I'm thinking of going back to investigate again."
"All right, I'll go with you next time. Give me a call."
"Okay."
Instead of saying goodnight, the two parted ways after lightly touching lips once more.
When she entered the house, her father was reading the newspaper in the living room. "Hey, did you have fun?"
"Yeah. It was okay."
"I'm glad to hear that."

"Weren't you in Osaka today?"
"I have to be back tomorrow anyway, so I took an earlier flight home."
"Did you have business here?"
"The PTA and board meeting are on the 30th. I want to try not to miss it if possible."
The PTA, huh. Machiko thought for a moment. If it's the day of the PTA and board meeting, all the teachers should be attending that. Wouldn't that be the perfect opportunity to take a good look around the audiovisual classroom?
"What time does the PTA start?"
"Let's see, around three in the afternoon, I think. The board meeting is after that, so it'll go on even later into the night. Why? Do you need something?"
"Nothing. Just asking." Machiko said casually, "I haven't swum in a while, so I'm exhausted. I'm going to take a bath and go to bed."
"Oh, good night."
"Good night."
Machiko was truly exhausted. Perhaps because of her sunburn, her body felt sluggish. She took a bath and crawled into bed. She thought about Hideto. And about that wonderfully passionate kiss in the car. And before she knew it, she had fallen into a deep sleep...

She was watching an old French movie on the portable TV in her room when she heard the phone ringing in the hallway, but at first Machiko didn't pay it any mind. She figured Mom would answer it as usual, so she left it be. It took her a while to realize that Mom was out. Without taking her eyes off the screen, she groped for the phone on her desk. Since it was a two-way intercom connected to the hallway, she could answer it from either side. Just as she was about to say, "This is Yuki," she heard her father's voice answer, "This is Yuki."
Her father had picked up the phone in the hallway at the same time. Machiko wondered if the call was actually for her, so she listened in.
"This is Detective K from K Detective Agency..."
"This is a problem," her father said, lowering his voice. "I told you not to call my home."
"I see. But it seemed urgent... When I called the office, they told me you were off today."
"Never mind... So, what was it?"
Machiko couldn't bring herself to put the receiver down. If she did it now, the sound would give away that she'd been listening. Still, what on earth could her father possibly want from a detective agency?
"I've looked into the three men who are being considered as suitors for your daughter,"
Machiko was on the verge of crying out. "...It seems Mr. M is currently in a serious relationship with a female colleague at his company. So, well..."
Machiko had never even heard of that man's name. She was just as unfamiliar with the next name the detective mentioned. She was simply dumbfounded.
"As for the third man, um, Mr. Hideto Koyama." Machiko gasped involuntarily.
"He's a student. A third-year in the Economics Department at W University. His family is from Osaka, and his father is a steady civil servant. ..." The man from the detective agency listed various details in a resume-like manner before adding,

"Well, his grades at school seem good, and he doesn't appear to have any particular romantic entanglements. Lately, he's been going out often, saying he's meeting a woman, but this is—"

"Anything else?"

"Nothing in particular, it seems."

"Got it, thanks for your hard work," Shozo said. "Send the bill to the company marked 'Personal Correspondence.'"

"Understood."

As soon as the call ended, she hung up the receiver and slumped down onto the bed. She finally grasped the situation. To investigate Hideto, her father had randomly selected two other men he knew and had them investigated under the pretense of a background check for a potential marriage. He must have felt guilty if he hadn't come up with a plausible excuse.

"Dad, that's terrible!" Machiko felt a surge of intense anger. She started to get up to go complain to her father right away, but just then the movie on TV was at a good part, so she changed her mind and decided to watch it first.

By the time the movie ended, Machiko's anger had subsided considerably. From Dad's perspective, he's just that worried about me. Besides, nothing bad came up in the investigation, so this might actually make me see Hideto in a new light.

Even so, she wanted to go to her father and say, "Well? Do you see what a fine person Hideto is now?" but she decided to hold back. "That's right — I need to discuss tomorrow's plans with him anyway."

Machiko called Hideto's apartment. There was no phone in his room, but they were supposed to put the call through.

"Hello?"

"This is Asahi-so." A woman's voice, sounding annoyed, answered.

"Could I speak to Mr. Hideto Koyama, please?"

"Ah — um, is this Ms. Yuki?"

"That's right..."

"Mr. Koyama left a message saying he'd be away unexpectedly for about three days."

"Really?" Machiko was surprised. "...Is there anything else?"

"No, nothing else."

"I see. Thank you..."

Before Machiko could even finish her thanks, the other end hung up with a click.

"What should I do...?"

Machiko was angry that Hideto hadn't even called her. Had something urgent come up? Even so, what should she do about investigating the audiovisual classroom? If she went to check it out alone, would Hideto scold her again? Still, the day of the board meeting seemed like a good opportunity, and it probably wouldn't be dangerous. If it got dangerous, she could just run away. Thinking this with a frightening (?) sense of nonchalance, Machiko decided to go by herself.

She would find that mysterious cassette and, the next time she saw Hideto, hold it right in front of him and say, "Here you go." He'd be quite surprised, no doubt...

4. To the Audio-Visual Classroom

Maybe I got ready a little too early — Machiko thought as she glanced at the clock. It was 6:20. Since the meeting starts at 7:00, leaving home at 7:00 would give her plenty of time to get there.

She had thought long and hard about what time to go, but summer nights stay light until nearly 7:00, making it easy to be spotted. The PTA meeting usually lasts until around 6:00, and the board meeting apparently goes on quite late after that. In the end, she figured that if she went around 8:00, she wouldn't have to worry about running into parents returning from the PTA meeting, and since the board meeting would be in full swing, the teachers probably wouldn't be wandering around the school grounds.

My father attends the PTA meetings, so he's been out since the afternoon. It's summer vacation, after all — what on earth are they doing? Apparently, they discuss things like the structure of summer classes and how to monitor students' behavior during the break — but from the students' perspective, it's probably just "none of your business!" Still, if it puts the parents at ease, maybe it's fine to let them do it as a sort of mental sedative for the parents.

Machiko hesitated over whether to call Yukie, but in the end, she decided against it. After all, Yukie is a married woman. If she were to get into trouble, she'd end up on the bad side of "Mr. Husband."

Machiko chided herself for feeling a bit frivolous. Three female students had already been killed. This wasn't a game. It really could, perhaps, lead to life-threatening consequences.

Yet, even though she understood all this, Machiko's heart still fluttered with a pleasant thrill. No matter how dangerous it was, as long as there was an element of adventure, it was like a sport to a young person. The reason youthful recklessness sometimes allows one to escape danger better than adult caution is likely because there is a certain lightheartedness to it — a relaxed state of mind.

Machiko agonized over what to wear. As a famous detective, she didn't want to look out of place, but she couldn't exactly wear a dress and high heels either. There might be times when she had to run away, sneak in, or even get into a fight (!). For those moments, she needed something comfortable yet stylish...

She finally made her difficult choice at 6:40. In the end, she went with a navy sports shirt and jeans. I considered a brighter-colored shirt, but I didn't want to stand out in the dark, so I chose navy. I did decide to tie a pink neckerchief around my neck, though. It would serve as an accent, and if I got injured, it could double as a bandage.

Machiko flopped down onto her bed.

She felt a little uneasy about whether tonight's investigation would turn up anything. The clue was far too vague. But for now, this was the only clue she had, so there was nothing she could do about it. Machiko sighed, keenly feeling the vast disparity in her situation compared to the famous detectives in novels. Unlike the detectives in novels, who have the police acting as their hands and feet, gathering all the

information so they need only piece it together like building blocks, Machiko had been given no real data and had to start from a complete blank slate.

"If I can catch the culprit with this, that would be quite something, really." Machiko thought to herself.

6:45. Still fifteen minutes to go. Machiko tried to imagine herself catching the murderer. The newspaper headlines flashed before her eyes.

"High School Girl Arrests Murderer!" "Young Couple Catches Murderer!" Their photos would grace the pages of the newspaper in all their glory. Before long, they might even be asked to appear on TV.

Taking a giant leap in her logic, Machiko imagined herself married to Hideto. Morning light flooded their neat little apartment, and Hideto was sitting in the dining room, reading the newspaper. Machiko, wearing a cute apron, made coffee and cooked up some ham and eggs, then served them to him with a smile.

A gentle smile, a soft morning kiss... "You'd better hurry or you'll be late," Machiko said, trying to hide her embarrassment, as she toasted some bread. A typical morning scene. "Hey, you really should get going..." "You really should get going..."

In the end, it was a mistake to stuff myself with dinner until I was full, thinking I might be off on some kind of adventure. Before she knew it, Machiko had fallen asleep.

She jolted awake and sat up in bed.

"Oh no! I fell asleep."

She rubbed her eyes, thinking it had only been five or ten minutes at most, and glanced at the clock. 8:30.

Thirty minutes? There was no mistaking it. It was a digital clock with clear numbers.

"What am I going to do..."

She felt like crying, but there was nothing she could do. She just had to rush over there.. Machiko bolted out of her room.

"I'm off!" She shouted that single sentence loudly to her mother, who was nowhere to be seen, and, unable to wait even to open the front door, dashed out into the hallway.

By the time Machiko arrived at school, it was just past 9:30. She was panting from running, and sweat was streaming down her back.

"Oh no!"

The board meeting might already be over. She wiped the sweat from her face with a handkerchief, then hurried to the secret entrance Haruko had told her about. She removed the wire mesh and slipped inside.

In her haste, her shirt caught on the end of a wire, tearing a hole in it.

To avoid any trouble getting out later, she simply propped the wire mesh up lightly against the wall and stepped quietly onto the school grounds. The moonlight made it easy enough to see her surroundings.

As Machiko approached the school building, she stopped short in surprise. Cars! More than ten large sedans were parked under the connecting corridor between the school buildings. What on earth were they doing there? If they were going to park their cars, there was a separate parking lot — so why were they parking here?

The drivers of the parked cars were idly smoking cigarettes and chatting. Machiko knew that if she approached any closer, she would be spotted, so she slipped into the school building through the nearest entrance. If she went up to the third floor, passed through the classrooms, and went out onto the balcony, she could make her way along the balconies to the front of the audiovisual classroom.

Machiko quietly climbed the dimly lit stairs. She regretted not bringing a flashlight, but it was too late now. Once she reached the third floor, she walked through the classroom and out onto the balcony. Far across the balcony, right around where the audiovisual classroom was, she could see a light flickering.

Was someone in the audiovisual classroom? If so, she'd have to come back another time, she thought, feeling a little disappointed, but she decided to check it out anyway.

She made her way along the balcony. The audiovisual classroom had a tiered layout, so while the entrance was on the third floor, the lowest section — the front podium where the TV was placed—was at the same height as the second floor. From the third-floor balcony, she could look down into the room through the high windows.

Machiko tiptoed toward the window where the light was leaking out. Since she was wearing shoes with sponge soles, she made almost no sound. The blinds had been lowered by remote control, but there was a gap wide enough to peer inside. She knelt down and quietly peered inside.

A dozen or so men were seated in the tiered seats, gazing toward the lectern. They were all well-built, well-dressed gentlemen in their late middle age. None of the faces looked familiar. What on earth were they doing? A board meeting?

Still, there aren't many people here, and they wouldn't hold a meeting in a place like this. She placed her hand on the window and gently pulled it open; it wasn't locked and swung open slightly. From inside, she could hear a man's voice coming through a microphone.

"What do you think? I'd like to get started right away." The man speaking seemed to be standing at the lectern. Unfortunately, from where Machiko was standing, she was in a blind spot and couldn't see the lectern itself.

"Eight hundred." One of the men sitting in the audience spoke up.

"A thousand," another man called out immediately.

"Twelve hundred."

"Thirteen hundred."

Bids came one after another. A voice from the microphone cut in.

"Well, what do you think? I can't let it go for that much. After all, this is a truly valuable item."

"Fifteen hundred."

"Sixteen hundred."

Machiko could tell that some sort of auction was taking place. But what on earth were they trying to sell? What could this "priceless item" be? It suddenly dawned on Machiko. It was the "pictures and jewel" cassette from Haruko's notebook. The painting and the jewel that had been in the cassette. But why go to such mysterious lengths just to sell a painting and a jewel? And right here in the school, of all places...

"Can we be sure we'll get the goods?" One of the men asked.
"They'll be in our possession within a week," the voice with the mic replied.
"Then we'll put up twenty million."
Twenty million! Twenty million yen! Machiko was stunned.
"Then it's settled."
"Can't you have them sent to us right away?"
"That would be too dangerous," the mic voice replied. "As I explained, the goods are quite bulky and require careful handling. Therefore, we cannot entrust them to the postal service or a delivery company; you must receive them in person. That means we must choose our method with the utmost care..."
"You've got a clever plan, don't you?"
"We'll trust you."
"Leave it to us. If you'll bear with us for a little while, we'll get it to you safely."
"Show us the next item," said another man.
There was a murmur as they seemed to be preparing to put the next item up for auction.
Machiko desperately wanted to see the podium. She felt she vaguely recognized the man's voice coming through the microphone. The sound echoed, making it hard to make out clearly, but she was certain it was a voice she'd heard before.
To see the podium, she had no choice but to peer inside through a window further ahead. Machiko quietly stepped away from the window, stood up, and started to walk down the balcony.
Suddenly, she sensed someone behind her. She started to turn around in a flash, but before she could, two arms grabbed her from behind, and at the same time, something like a handkerchief was pressed over her mouth and nose. A sweet, sour smell filled her nose, and her head spun suddenly.
It's a drug! They're trying to put me to sleep! Machiko struggled to break free, but her limbs wouldn't obey her. Her head grew heavy, and her vision blurred. The sweet, sour scent seemed to seep right into her brain, making her eyelids heavy until they closed. And that was it — she lost all awareness.

She could hear her own breathing. Even after she realized her eyes were open, she couldn't make out what she was seeing for a while. It was dark. She was in a dark place. She was lying down. What had happened? What had gone on?
That's right, she remembered. Someone had made her inhale a drug, and she'd fallen asleep - where was she? Where had she been brought?
Gradually, her vision came into focus, and her eyes adjusted to the darkness... Machiko sat up with a start. She opened her eyes wide and looked around.
"...No way..."
She sat there, dumbfounded. It wasn't the corner of a storage room, nor was it a deserted forest. It was Machiko's room. Machiko was sitting on the bed in her own room.

5. Crisis

"It’s so mean of you to just leave without saying a word."
"I’m sorry, I’m sorry." A coffee shop near Nakano Station. Hideto was doing his best to calm down a sulking Machiko.
"A relative suddenly got into trouble, so I had to go. I didn’t even have time to call."
"You could have at least called after you left." Machiko kept pestering him. "It’s fine. You’ll just forget about me right away anyway."
"That’s not true. Come on, don’t be so mad."
"By now, I might have been killed. And yet—"
"What did you say?"
"Nothing."
"What do you mean by that?"
"It’s fine."
"It’s not fine. Did something happen? Did you do something on your own?"
"But you’re going to be gone."
"I told you so many times not to do things on your own... So, what happened?" When he asked her so earnestly, this time it was Machiko who felt a little embarrassed.
"No, it’s nothing big. Just a little..."
"So, tell me."
"Well... you see..."
"Did something happen?"
"I guess it did, but I guess it didn't—"
"What do you mean?"
"Hey, don't laugh. Promise me you won't laugh, absolutely not."
"I promise." Hideto said with a puzzled look on his face.
Machiko told him everything that had happened the night three days earlier. She told him how she’d been getting ready to go out but ended up falling asleep until 8:30, how she’d rushed to school in a panic and seen lots of suspicious cars, and about the strange "auction" taking place in the audiovisual classroom...
"And then? Did you get a look at the man speaking into the microphone?" Hideto asked eagerly.
"I was just about to move to get a better look. That’s when I was suddenly grabbed from behind—"
"By whom?"
"I don’t know. He covered my face with a handkerchief soaked in some kind of drug, and I just fell asleep."
"Really? Well, it’s a miracle you made it back safely." Hideto stared intently at Machiko. "You weren’t a ghost, were you?"
"So?"
"Stop it. Anyway, I lost consciousness — and when I came to, I was in my room."
"Which room?"
"My own — I was sleeping in my bed."

Hideto blinked in disbelief, his eyes wide. Machiko panicked, "Don’t laugh! You promised! I don’t want you to laugh!"

"O-okay..." Saying that, Hideto couldn’t help but burst out laughing. "—But it’s—"

"Don’t laugh! Or I’ll start crying out loud right here!"

"Okay, okay." Hideto quickly gulped down the water in his glass to stifle his laughter, then said, "It’s just that you talk like that. You should’ve just said from the start that it was a dream."

"I don’t know what’s going on either." The coffee arrived, so the two of them sipped their hot coffee for a while, lost in thought. Hot coffee on a hot day. That’s the best.

"But don’t you think it’s a little too vivid for a dream? I remember every single detail perfectly."

"That’s true. But sometimes dreams are so vivid, it’s just like watching a movie."

"I guess so." Machiko looked dejected. "After all, Mom says I was fast asleep and she didn’t even try to wake me up, and Dad says I was still asleep when he got back from the board meeting around nine. With that, there’s no way anyone can think I didn’t have a dream, right? It’s so frustrating."

"Come on, don’t get so down."

"The clothes?"

"Well... Besides, it’s the same with my clothes, too."

"The clothes I was wearing that night. I was wearing a navy blue sports shirt, but when I took down the wire fence to get inside, I snagged it on the wire and tore it a little. But when I woke up, there wasn’t a single hole in it. My jeans should have been dirty, too, but they’re completely clean. No matter how you look at it, it seems like I must have been dreaming."

"I see. But it’s a good thing it was a dream. If it hadn’t been, you might not be alive right now."

Machiko looked disappointed as she sipped her coffee, but suddenly stopped.

"Wait a minute - that’s it! Why didn’t I realize that before?!"

"What’s wrong?"

"Hey, let’s go to school right now!"

"All the way to Kunitachi? Why?"

"Why do you ask?"

"The fence! The secret entrance I went through! No one else should know about that spot. Back then, after I went inside, I didn’t put it back exactly as it was so I could get out easily — I just propped it up slightly. But you can’t tell just by looking at it. So, if that really happened, the fence should still be propped up like that."

"I see. But... it’s so hot out here..."

"It’s fine! I’ll go check it out by myself."

"Okay, okay." Hideto hurriedly stood up.

It was a summer afternoon. The heat was at its peak. Wiping the sweat from their brows with handkerchiefs, the two hurried from Kunitachi Station under the blazing sun. They could have taken their time, but Machiko kept urging them on, saying, "Hurry, hurry!"

"It’s over there!"
"What do you think?"
When they finally reached the spot in question, Machiko rushed over.
"It’s — it’s stuck in there."
Machiko looked as if she were about to burst into tears.
"Well, well. Thanks for coming out in this heat."
"I’m sorry."
"It’s fine. Since we’re here, let’s take a look at the 'scene’ while we’re at it. We’ve come all this way."
Machiko didn’t seem too keen on the idea, but she removed the wire mesh and stepped inside. "Where did your shirt get caught?"
"Around here..."
He examined the wire mesh, but couldn’t find any sharp or protruding parts that might have snagged her clothes - the two walked toward the school building.
Machiko said, "A car was parked over there the whole time."
Hideto was examining the ground in that area, but
"With all this gravel, we won’t be able to see any tire tracks. Um, was there anything else?"
"I don’t know..."
"That’s right. You said the drivers were smoking, didn’t you?"
"Yeah, around there, I think."
Hideto searched around for a while, then said, "I don’t see any cigarette butts."
"Never mind. I’m such an idiot. Ugh, I just want to die."
"Cheer up. Okay, let’s go inside the way you walked."
Following the route Machiko (apparently) took three nights earlier, the two entered the school building, went up to the third floor, and stepped out onto the balcony.
"Look, you can peek inside from here."
"I see. So you can’t see the teacher’s desk from here."
"That’s where I got caught."
"Any signs of a struggle? Like a collapsed wall or something?"
"It’s not like I'm King Kong."
"Alright, let’s go inside one last time."
The two of them went around the front and quietly slipped into the audiovisual classroom.
They searched the classroom and the control room, but found nothing of note.
"What a waste of time," Machiko said in a resigned tone.
"Well, just think of it as practical training for detective work."
"Hey, let’s go out somewhere. I feel so frustrated."
When they got home, Yukie happened to call. She asked if they’d like to come over so she could treat them to a home-cooked meal. Since we also needed to give Yukie a wedding gift, Hideto and I decided to go together.
The next day, I met up with Hideto in Shinjuku. After buying a gift at the department store, we headed to Yukie’s house. Since Mr. Kurabayashi’s apartment in Koganei

was a bit cramped, we had planned to go to Yukie’s parents’ home in Koenji instead. Mr. Kurabayashi was supposed to be there as well.

We arrived at Yukie’s house around noon. Machiko had been there a couple of times before, but this was her first time meeting Yukie’s parents. They were a laid-back couple who didn’t care much about material things, and the father looked uncannily like Yukie. Although they ran a pharmacy, the shop was located separately, so their traditional Japanese-style house was spacious — almost too big for a household of just the parents and their one daughter.

"Well, eventually, we’re thinking of having you live here too, Professor," the father said cheerfully.

Yukie looked every bit the housewife, wearing a floral apron and bustling about busily. Since Hideto had only ever seen Yukie in her school uniform, his eyes widened in surprise.

"Hello, welcome." Professor Kurabayashi emerged from the back of the house. Machiko introduced Hideto to the professor.

"He’s handsome, isn’t he?" Yukie said to Mr. Kurabayashi, looking at Hideto. "He’s young, unlike you."

Hideto gave a wry smile and whispered softly to Machiko. "It feels like I’ve been set up."

The four of them gathered in Yukie’s room in the back, had sandwiches for lunch, and chatted about all sorts of things. Watching Professor Kurabayashi and Yukie, Machiko thought to herself how truly wonderful they were. Just a brief exchange of glances, or even a slight nod from the professor, was enough for Yukie to immediately get up and fetch an ashtray or pour some tea.

Whenever they had something to discuss, they would lean in close and exchange a few quiet words — it made her feel as though they were truly a married couple. It was different from a relationship with a boyfriend. Was it too soon for me to feel envious? After all, I’m only seventeen...

I went out of my way to avoid talking about the incident. Of course, I had strictly warned Hideto not to mention the adventure from my dream.

We were treated to dinner, and we left Yukie’s house around 8:30. Professor Kurabayashi and Yukie came along, saying they’d walk us to the station. The four of us strolled leisurely along the five-minute walk to the station.

As we walked, the men and women split up. Professor Kurabayashi and Hideto walked at a leisurely pace, trailing slightly behind Machiko and the others, who were walking along, laughing cheerfully. Professor Kurabayashi had apparently played basketball in college, so the two of them were engrossed in a conversation about sports.

Near the station, large buildings were under construction all over the place.

"It’s so noisy during the day," Yukie complained.

"Why don’t we head over toward Koganei?"

"I prefer it this way — I don’t get bored."

"What are you talking about?"

"Hehe..." Yukie stuck out her tongue a little.

The two of them were just passing by a construction site. After a brief pause in his conversation with Professor Kurabayashi, Hideto looked at the two walking ahead of him. Then, he casually glanced upward.

What was that? Something was falling. Something was—.

"Watch out!" Hideto shouted.

Several steel beams fell toward Machiko and Yukie's heads. The two looked up. Hideto dashed forward, but there was no way he could make it in time. Just then, Yukie shoved Machiko out of the way with all her might. The steel beams clattered loudly as they bounced off the concrete pavement.

"Yukie!"

Professor Kurabayashi rushed over - Machiko had narrowly avoided being struck by the steel beams, but Yukie lay lifeless on the ground, her arm covered in blood.

"Yukie!"

Machiko leapt to her feet. Hideto snapped, "Call an ambulance!"

Then he looked up. High above, on the steel scaffolding, something moved briefly.

"Someone's up there!"

Hideto dashed into the construction site. His feet caught on piles of building materials as he scanned the area. The scattered lamps provided just enough light to make out the surroundings. A little ways off, a staircase stretched all the way up. The metal steps were completely exposed.

Hideto raced up the stairs frantically. How many floors was that? The seventh or eighth? In any case, it was near the top floor. Breathless, he had climbed about four floors when he suddenly pricked up his ears. He could hear the hum of a motor. The sound seemed to be coming from far away, moving steadily downward.

"Damn it! It's the elevator!"

It had to be a construction elevator. Hideto flew down the stairs. Would he make it in time? — When he reached the first floor, he searched around for the elevator, but by the time he finally found it, it was already empty, and there was no one in sight. Unable to give up, he wandered around the area when the siren of an ambulance began to approach.

6. The Chase

Soon, dawn broke — Machiko was dozing off in the hospital waiting room.

"Machiko, wake up."

She opened her eyes to find Hideto peering down at her.

"Hideto — where's Yukie?"

"It's nothing serious. It's a miracle. Not a single steel beam hit her directly. She just got hit in the arm by a rebounding beam and suffered an injury."

"Thank goodness!"

"She's just in shock, so she's taken some sleeping pills and is resting now. You should go home."

"Okay. What about the police?"

"The doctor and I talked to them. They're probably investigating the scene right now."

"It’s scary. Why on earth did this happen to us...? Or maybe it’s just me?"
"I don’t know."
"Yukie must have just been caught in the crossfire. Oh, I feel so bad for the professor."
"Don’t think like that."
"What about the professor?"
"He's staying by Ms. Yukie’s side. Come on, I’ll walk you home."
"Okay."
With Hideto’s arm around her shoulders, Machiko began walking down the dim, silent hospital corridor. They took the elevator from the fifth-floor ward down to the first floor. After getting off the elevator, Machiko turned right toward the late-night entrance and, glancing casually as the doors of the adjacent elevator closed, stopped in her tracks.
"What’s wrong?"
"The person who just got on that elevator... it was Dr. Nishida."
"Dr. Nishida?"
"The art teacher. You know, he was acting a little strange the other day..."
Hideto rushed over to the front desk. He asked the nurse on duty, "Did the person who just got on the elevator ask you anything?"
"Yes. He asked where the room was for the girl who was injured in the accident last night."
"Did he say what he wanted?"
"He said he was a relative..."
Machiko looked at the elevator’s floor indicator and said, "Hey, it’s stopped on the third floor!"
"All right, let’s take the other elevator. We might get to the fifth floor first." Then, to the nurse on duty, "There’s a police officer in the fifth-floor duty room. Call him right away and tell him to secure the ward!"
The two of them rushed into the elevator that had just come down and headed up to the fifth floor. It was an old elevator, so it was painfully slow.
"Damn it! We should have just taken the stairs!"
"I wonder if Dr. Nishida really is the culprit..."
"What else could he be doing here? Once he found out she wasn’t dead, the only explanation is that he came to kill her. Besides, no one else should know about this case yet—except the killer."
They finally reached the fifth floor, and the doors opened.
"Nice timing! The other elevator is just arriving."
The elevator next to them came up. Hideto braced himself, facing it head-on. The doors clanged open.
No one was inside. The two exchanged glances.
"They must have gotten off on the third floor!"
"Let’s go to the hospital room."
A uniformed police officer was standing guard in front of Yukie’s room. The police had left him there just in case. Hideto briefly explained the situation.
"I’ll stay here. Could you go check the stairs?"

"Understood. Please be careful." The officer ran toward the stairs.
"Do you think he'll come?"
"I don't know. He might have run away once he realized you saw him. Anyway, as long as we stay here and hold our ground, he won't try to force his way in."
The two stood in front of the door, keeping a sharp watch. Not a sound could be heard from the direction of the stairs.
"...I wonder if he ran away."
"I hope so—"
Just then, a loud crash of shattering glass came from inside the hospital room.

Yukie was sleeping, breathing quietly. Kurabayashi pulled a chair close to her bed and gazed intently at her sleeping face. The room was dim with the lights off, but since the window curtains were open, the red glow of the neon lights outside seeped in slightly, casting strange patterns on the ceiling.
Dr. Kurabayashi gently reached out and placed his hand on Yukie's forehead. Yukie took a deep breath and shifted slightly, but then continued sleeping just as she was. Kurabayashi gazed at his wife, who still retained a touch of childlike innocence, with eyes full of love. Yet, deep wrinkles of anguish were etched into his brow, betraying an extraordinary inner struggle.
"What should we do?" He muttered without thinking, and the teacher let out a deep sigh, burying his face in his hands.
There was a faint sound at the window, and Mr. Kurabayashi looked up. A face was staring at us through the glass.
Mr. Kurabayashi quickly stood up, swung the chair he had been sitting in, and hurled it at the window.
The window shattered into pieces.

Hideto and Machiko rushed into the hospital room.
"It's him!" The teacher pointed at the window. "He came through the window!"
Hideto ran to the window, now a gaping hole, and, watching out for shards, pushed it open and stuck his head out.
On the narrow ledge below the window, a small man was moving cautiously, pressing himself flat against the exterior wall toward the emergency staircase a few meters away.
Machiko also stuck her head out the window and shouted, "Mr. Nishida!"
Hideto looked down at the street below. He could see the police officer who had just gone down the stairs near the hospital entrance. Hey!"
He shouted with all his might, and the officer looked around.

Nishida had finally reached the emergency staircase and was climbing over the railing.
"Hey! Over here! This way!"
The officer finally noticed Hideto and ran straight to the window.
"It's the emergency staircase! Catch him!"

The officer spotted a figure coming down the stairs and ran up from below. When Nishida noticed the officer, he abruptly stopped in his tracks and began climbing the emergency staircase in the opposite direction.

"We're going up!"

Hideto bolted out of the hospital room. Machiko followed close behind.

When they reached the emergency staircase, Nishida and the officer were already above them. Hideto started climbing as well. Noticing Machiko following him,

"You stay down here!"

"No way!"

There was no time for an argument. Hideto kept running up the stairs.

Machiko followed, though she was falling behind.

Out of breath, Machiko finally reached the rooftop. It was flat and quite spacious. In one corner were stairs, an elevator exit, and a water tank, while a large TV antenna cast a black silhouette

against the dawning sky. Ropes for hanging laundry stretched all around, making her feel as if she had crawled under a coarse net.

"Where is everyone?" As she looked around, a voice called out from a distant corner: "Don't do anything stupid!"

She hurried over and found a police officer and Hideto cornering Nishida.

Something that looked like a knife glinted in Nishida's hand.

"Stop this nonsense. Drop the knife." The police officer drew his gun, took aim, and advanced inch by inch.

Machiko stared blankly at the nightmarish scene. That same Mr. Nishida, now holding a knife, stood facing them with an evil expression, looking like a completely different person.

"Oh, you're here too!" Nishida noticed Machiko and called out. "Do you know whose knife this is?

It belongs to Haruko Ono. She was planning to kill me. She said it was revenge for her friend. Hah, as if she could pull that off! I got there first."

"Why? Why did you kill her!" Machiko screamed.

"They were all young and had dreams. They had a future. They died at the best time of their lives. I let them die at the happiest moment. I'd almost expect them to thank me. You're beautiful, too. Young and beautiful..."

Nishida raised the knife to throw it. The police officer's pistol fired with a sharp crack, and Nishida's body flew about a meter into the air before rolling to the ground.

A terrifying silence fell. Machiko stood frozen in place.

The police officer and Hideto rushed over to Nishida. For a moment, she could hear them saying something to him, but soon the officer hurried off toward the elevator, and Hideto stood up and walked over to Machiko.

"I don't think he'll make it."

"So it was him after all..."

"He must have been out of his mind."

"I suppose so..."

Soon, several doctors emerged from the elevator, placed Nishida on a stretcher, and carried him away.

Machiko threw herself into Hideto's arms. "So it's over now. Everything."

"Yeah, it's okay now."

"Kiss me."

The two pressed their lips together. Behind them, someone cleared their throat.

"Um—" The young police officer said hesitantly, "If you make too much of a scene, well, it's a violation of the Minor Offenses Act, so..."

But that didn't mean everything was over.

Nishida died shortly after that, and since they couldn't take his statement, Machiko and Hideto had to undergo a long interrogation at the police station.

The media ran headlines like "Serial Killer Is a High School Teacher!" and for a while, Tezuka Academy was nearly overrun by reporters from weekly magazines and other publications. However, since it was the middle of summer vacation, it didn't seem to have much of a negative impact on the students.

Overall, the school's reputation did not suffer as much as the administration had feared. This was likely because the crime was attributed to the abnormal personality of a single teacher, and the school itself was not held responsible. If anything, thanks to this incident, the name of Tezuka Academy became known nationwide. Articles in weekly magazines described it as having a "privileged environment" and a "relaxed, free-spirited school atmosphere," which led to a flood of inquiries about enrollment, keeping the administrative office swamped. At this rate, it looked like next year's entrance exams would be extremely competitive.

Of course, the media's favorable coverage was likely due in part to the fact that many of the parents were influential figures.

Since the newspapers had kept Machiko's name out of the reports, she wasn't bothered by the media frenzy, leaving her feeling both relieved and disappointed.

Since Hideto had played such a big role in protecting Machiko, my father, Shozo, seemed to have taken a real liking to him. He even told Hideto, "Please join my company after you graduate," which made Hideto very happy. Needless to say, Machiko was delighted as well.

On top of that, one evening while we were watching TV in the living room, Shozo suddenly said this: "Machiko."

"What?"

"Do you like Koyama?"

"Yes. Why?"

"What's going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"Between the two of you. Have you promised to get married or something?"

"Come on, Dad, what are you talking about? We haven't even gotten that far yet."

"You're blushing. I hope you haven't given him your all already."

Machiko's face turned red all the way down to her neck. "Don't say such weird things!"

"Never mind. Anyway, just be careful not to get pregnant."

"Dad, you're such a... Are you drunk?"
"No. But personally, I'd like you to go to college."
"I know. That's what I plan to do."
"Fine by me. If you want to get married before then, go ahead, but you'd better go to college."
Machiko stared intently at her father's face. "Dad... Are you serious?"
"If you don't want to, I certainly won't force you. But if it's Koyama, I won't have any complaints."
"Thank you, Dad! I'll let you know when the time comes!"

Machiko thought to herself. Just over a year and a half left until she graduated from high school. Then she would get married. Hideto would go to work, and she would go to college. Children? There's no rush. After she graduated from college would be plenty of time.
Hideto, too, was acting as if they were officially engaged now. That said, just to be clear, their relationship hadn't progressed beyond the kiss they shared when they parted ways.

Summer vacation, huh? It's already the second half of August. Once September comes, there are exams that have been postponed. I really need to start on my homework soon. But what a summer vacation it was! There was tragedy, adventure, and romance. I doubt I'll ever have a summer vacation like this again.
However, summer vacation wasn't over just yet.
Professor Kurabayashi and Yukie had disappeared. They'd vacated their apartment in Koganei, and both had vanished without a trace.
Yukie's parents were terribly worried. Especially after an incident like that.
However, before long, a letter from Yukie arrived at her parents' home. It simply read, "We're both fine, so please don't worry. Please don't look for us. We'll definitely be back soon." There was no return address, and the postmark was from Osaka. Though they didn't quite understand what was going on, her parents still breathed a sigh of relief...

"I'm sure they just wanted some time alone to think things through. Let's give them some space," Hideto said.
"I suppose so..." Machiko nodded. Time alone to think things through, huh...? Whatever the circumstances, the idea of the two of them being somewhere together, alone, without anyone knowing, made her feel strangely envious.
Summer was drawing to a close.

Part 3: Schoolday of the Dead

1. The New Semester Begins

The second semester began on September 8th. The students who came to school had no shortage of topics to discuss for a while.

The center of attention was, of course, Machiko. She was bombarded with questions from everyone — "What was it like back then?" "Is this story true?" — and was at a loss for words.

In other news, Class C's homeroom teacher had become Ms. Misawa, the music teacher. Since the school didn't want to make public the fact that Mr. Kurabayashi had disappeared with Yukie, Ms. Misawa was instructed to explain that Mr. Kurabayashi had suddenly had to attend to business in the countryside and wouldn't be able to return for a while. The students grumbled, but when Ms. Misawa announced, "Since Yukie Nagaike is Mr. Kurabayashi's wife, she has gone with him and will also be taking a leave of absence for a while,"

The shock that swept through the class at that moment was so intense that it felt as though even a gorilla had burst into the classroom — and it wouldn't have been any more shocking than that.

Students who had secretly admired Mr. Kurabayashi were on the verge of tears.

"This is terrible! It's too much!" Cries of lament rose from all around.

Machiko also feigned surprise, looking as though she were hearing the news for the first time. If she had even hinted that she'd known all along and kept quiet, the atmosphere was such that she might literally have been killed.

However, coldly and ruthlessly, the exams began. Once the five-day exam period ended, the excitement in the class gradually subsided, and things settled down.

It was already mid-September, and everyone began to get excited about a new event — the school festival.

"The school festival is on November 3rd, 4th, and 5th."

As soon as the posters went up, it served as the signal for every club to start preparing all at once. This year's theme...

What should the highlight be? Is there a way to really surprise everyone? Ideas, ideas, ideas!

Each club secretly hatches plans in their own room, competing while keeping their displays under wraps from one another. During the school festival, parents, guardians, and teachers who came to visit cast their votes, and the club recognized as the most unique and outstanding would have its budget for the next term doubled. That's why everyone was desperate.

Since Machiko didn't belong to any club, she was just a carefree spectator, but after all, she was a veteran of a major incident. She was treated like a member of parliament, with people asking her to speak at events or just lend her name to their club as an advisor.

One particularly unusual initiative stood out: the art club announced a contest dubbed the "Ikkaten" (One-Subject Exhibition) — a play on the "Nikkaten" (Two-Subject

Exhibition) — inviting submissions from the general student body and offering a first-place prize of 50,000 yen.

Since they stated they "prioritize the originality of the concept over technical skill," quite a few students reacted with, "If they're giving away 50,000 yen, I might as well give it a shot," followed by,

"Huh?

"Sure, why not?"

"I might give it a try."

It also stated that the works would be sold on the day of the school festival if parents or guardians wished to purchase them, but everyone whispered among themselves, wondering if anyone would actually be foolish enough to buy a student's painting.

One day on her way home, Machiko was approached by Miki Kijima, the drama club's secretary. Miki was a tall, slender beauty and one of the top students in Class B. "Hey, Yuki, I need to talk to you for a second."

"How about we grab something sweet somewhere?"

They went into a dessert shop near the station and ate ojiya. Machiko's eyes widened when she saw Miki polish off her ojiya in the blink of an eye and order a second bowl.

"I just can't resist sweets," Miki said, then added, "By the way, Yuki-san — can I call you Machiko?"

"Sure, of course. Is there something you need from me?"

"Then just call me Miki. Actually, it's about the drama club's performance for the upcoming school festival."

"We've been brainstorming ideas, but we just can't settle on anything. So, one person suggested, 'Since such a dramatic incident happened right under our noses, let's turn that into a play'. In other words, they want to put your adventure story on stage."

"You're such a weirdo."

"I do feel a little bad for the people who passed away, but we're definitely not doing this as a joke. I promise. After all, it was a huge event for us, and I thought it wouldn't be a bad idea to reflect on what it all meant. Excuse me for a moment."

Miki finished her second bowl of sweet red bean soup in the blink of an eye, then said, "I'll have another bowl - so, what do you say? Why don't you try writing the script?"

Machiko was taken aback. "I've never written a script before."

"It's fine. Just write down the general outline and the specific details of the incident. We'll take care of shaping it into a form that can be staged. How about it?"

"Well..."

"Please, I'm begging you! I beseech you!" Miki clasped her hands together in a prayer.

"Stop it. Give me a moment to think about it."

"This is a real dilemma." When Machiko explained the situation, Hideto seemed interested.

"But that’s not a bad idea. Everyone only knows about the incident in a vague way, after all. I think it would be good to set the record straight here."
"But I can’t write a script."
"A script, huh..." Hideto seemed to be deep in thought for a moment, but eventually said, "Why don’t I write it?"
"You?"
"You don’t have to be so surprised."
"But — have you ever written one before?"
"Just dabbled a bit. What do you say? Want me to give it a try?"
"Sure, of course. Then I’ll introduce you to the drama club. But..."
"What is it? If you don’t like her—"
"That’s not it."
"But you don’t seem too keen on it."
"She’s a beauty."
"Who?"
"The girl from the drama club. Her name is Miki Takashima. She’s smart and sophisticated, and on top of that, she’s beautiful. It’s fine to introduce her to you, but if you cheat on me..."
"You’re overthinking it." Hideto laughed, pulled Machiko close, and lightly pressed his lips against hers - just to clarify, the two of them were in Machiko’s room.
"...Hey, I wonder where those two are."
"You mean Yukie and the teacher?"
"Yeah. I haven’t heard from them since then. I wonder how they’re doing."
"Don’t worry about them."
"I know I shouldn’t, but... I wonder if they have something to do with the case."
"The case is over, isn’t it?"
"I suppose so - probably."
"Is something bothering you?"
"Yeah..." Machiko fell deep in thought. "I know Mr. Nishida was the culprit. But, why were those three killed? Even if they were chosen at random, I can’t help but think there must be some reason. Besides, we still don’t know anything about that 'Paintings and Jewels’ cassette. Even if everything I saw in the audio-visual classroom was just a dream, it’s a fact that the cassette was mentioned in Haruko’s notebook. We haven’t figured out a single thing about that."
"Maybe Haruko was just overthinking it."
"But that doesn’t make sense. How did Haruko know that Professor Nishida was the culprit? And why did she go out of her way to buy that mountaineering knife?"
Hideto fell deep in thought.
Just then, his mother poked her head in.
"Machiko, we have a visitor."
"Who?"
"I’m not sure, but it looks like a student."
Machiko went with Hideto to the living room. Sitting on the sofa was a student wearing thick glasses who looked somewhat scruffy.

"Um, I’m Machiko."
"Ah, nice to meet you. "My name is Kanayama. I used to be a boarder at Ms. Ono’s house..."
"Ms. Ono? Oh, at Haruko’s apartment?"
"That’s right. Haruko asked me to do people’s homework from time to time, and I earned some money that way."
"Oh! So you’re the University of Tokyo student?"
The man named Kanayama gave a wry smile, "It seems Haruko had been putting it that way, but to be precise, she’s actually a third-year rōnin who failed the entrance exam for the University of Tokyo three times."
"Is that so?" Machiko laughed. "That’s just like Haruko."
"Yes, she was a lovely girl. Honestly — it’s such a pity." Kanayama said this with a certain poignancy, and continued,
"So, actually, the reason I came to see you today is that I’ve finally decided to give up on the University of Tokyo and go back to the countryside."
"Oh my."
"And, even though it’s a bit late in the game, there’s something I thought you should know."
"What is it?"
"Well, actually, Haruko used to come over to my place a lot, and while I was working on that homework of mine, she’d often kill time by flipping through the magazines and books lying around. And, the day before I was killed, Haruko came over again and was flipping through a ten-volume art encyclopedia to pass the time."
"An art encyclopedia?"
"Yes. Well, I’m not the least bit interested in art myself, but it’s a ten-volume set I took from a friend as collateral for a loan."
"And?"
"But Haruko started looking at it with this strangely intense enthusiasm. I had to run an errand, so I asked her if it was okay for her to keep looking at it — she seemed unusually serious about it. I told her she could look through it as much as she wanted, and I left. My errand took longer than expected, and I didn’t get back until three hours later. To my surprise, Haruko was still looking at the art collection. Every single volume had been taken out of the box and stacked up. When I asked, 'What are you looking for?’ her eyes sparkled, and she said, 'I’ve figured it out, thank you,’ and without even putting the books back in the box, she just walked out. The way she acted made it seem like she’d made some kind of momentous decision — it wasn’t just a trivial matter — so I was concerned, but I never imagined that the very next day, something like that would happen... It was such a shock to me, too, that I’d completely forgotten about the art collection. But yesterday, while I was packing and sorting through books to sell, it suddenly came back to me. And since I heard from Haruko’s mother that you were the one who found the killer, I thought I’d better talk to you about it, so that’s why I’ve come to see you."
"I’m sorry to have gone to the trouble of coming all this way."

"I'd like to ask you something," Hideto interjected. "Did you happen to notice which painting in the collection Haruko was looking at in particular?"
"Well, I had already left by then..."
"Even just one would be fine."
"I'm sorry, but I have absolutely no idea."
"I see." Hideto said, looking disappointed. "I'm afraid it's all a bit vague..."
"No, thank you so much."
As Kanayama was about to leave, Hideto asked, "Do you still have that art collection?"
"No, actually, a used bookstore took it away yesterday."
"That's too bad... Which used bookstore was it?" Hideto asked Kanayama for the location of the used bookstore and jotted it down.
"What are you going to do?" After Kanayama left, Machiko asked Hideto.
"I thought I'd ask to see it if it's still there."
"I wonder if it has anything to do with the 'painting' that was on the cassette?"
"I don't know. Anyway, I'm going to pop over to that used bookstore."
"I'd like to go too, but I'm meeting Mom in a little while."
"Oh, right. I'll call you later."
"Please do." Hideto hurried home.
Had Haruko found some clue about the "painting" in the art collection? Then it was surely no coincidence that Haruko was murdered the very next day. Something was likely hidden there that pointed to Nishida as the culprit.
Even though the culprit, Nishida, was dead, Machiko couldn't find peace of mind until all the mysteries were solved.
"Maybe this time I'll finally figure something out." But her hopes were dashed. By the time Hideto rushed over, the art collection had already been bought by someone else.

2. The Scheme

"So, how was the food?" Shozo asked.
"I'm stuffed. I've never had a steak like that before." Hideto sighed dramatically.
"A young man like you ought to be able to polish off two or three steaks like that."
"Oh, Dad," Machiko said. "Eating too much meat causes arteriosclerosis, you know."
"No, don't worry," Hideto said. "By the time I'm in a position to eat that much meat, I'll have lost all my teeth anyway."
The three of them were dining at the T Hotel restaurant.
It was already mid-October, and through the large windows, the night view spreading out below seemed to be sinking into the clear, cold air.
Machiko was wearing a pale purple dress, looking more grown-up than usual. Hideto, too, was dressed smartly in a navy suit, giving the impression of a fresh-faced new office worker at first glance.
"Hey, Machiko, don't drink too much wine."
"I'll be fine. If I get drunk, Hideto-san will carry me home."
"It's fine if you just get drunk, but don't go causing a scene."

"Oh, how rude. They say a woman on the prowl is quite charming."
"No matter how charming, I'd rather not get bitten."
How many times have the three of us eaten together now? Machiko wondered. By now, her father and Hideto had become so close they could talk freely.
"Oh, right. I heard the other day that Koyama-kun wrote the script for the play they're putting on at the upcoming school festival?"
"That one?" Hideto scratched his head. "Nah, it's nothing special."
"Come on, I heard the drama club kids are totally obsessed with it and practicing like crazy. Though, of course, the details are top secret — they won't tell anyone."
"They won't even tell me," Machiko glared at Hideto. "No matter how much I ask, he just plays dumb."
"Isn't that more fun? Besides, you know all about the case yourself."
It was truly infuriating. Machiko was seething inside. No matter how much she begged him to let her read the script, Hideto just kept dodging the question. Speaking of the case, the whereabouts of Professor Kurabayashi and Yukie were still unknown. It seemed the school was starting to think it was about time they did something about it.
"Dad, do you think you'll be able to come to the school festival?"
"Well, I do have my duties as a board member, so I'm planning to make an effort to attend."
"I can't count on your promises."
"You little rascal! It's thanks to those broken promises that I get to keep giving you your allowance!"
The three of them burst out laughing.
After finishing their meal, the three of them went downstairs and strolled through the lobby. There were rows of stylish shops selling all kinds of imported goods; just browsing through them was never boring.
"Hey, that ring is lovely!"
"Let me see," said Shozo, peering into the window. "Oh, it's not a very good stone."
"Really? It's pretty."
"You have a good eye," said Hideto.
"Not really," Shozo laughed. "In my line of work, I have to be able to spot top-quality goods, no matter what they are."
"That's impressive."
The three of them started walking again. A girl in a blue blazer came out of the flower shop right in front of them, and the three of them found themselves face to face.
"...Yukie!" Machiko stopped in her tracks, stunned.
"Machiko..." For a moment, Yukie smiled at her fondly, but then, as if suddenly struck by a thought, she spun around, turned her back, and ran off.
"Yukie! Wait!"
"Stay here. I'll go after her."
Hideto held Machiko back and ran off.
"Dad, what on earth happened? Why did she run away?"

"I have no idea - but since that girl is here, Professor Kurabayashi must have returned to Tokyo as well."
Yukie slipped through the surprised guests, running wildly back and forth through the winding corridors. After running for a while, she stopped, turned around, and, seeing that no one was following her, finally looked relieved.
She was understandably out of breath and struggling, but she couldn’t afford to wander around any longer. Glancing around, she spotted an arrow pointing to "Elevator" and hurried over.
Suddenly, a figure blocked her path, and Yukie froze in her tracks.
"You can’t keep running away forever," Hideto said. "Let’s sit down and talk this through."

Machiko waited anxiously for Hideto to return.
"Ah, you’re finally back. What happened?"
"No luck," Hideto shook his head. "I looked everywhere, but I couldn’t find her. I’m sorry."
"It can’t be helped," Shozo said. "There are plenty of places to hide inside a hotel."
"But why did she run away? No matter how much I think about it, I just don’t understand."
"Well, there’s no use dwelling on it. Come on, let’s head back."
The three of them set off for home — Machiko barely spoke a word in the car.

The smile that flashed across Yukie’s face for a moment was as warm and familiar as ever. And yet, why did she suddenly run away? Why? Why? Machiko kept thinking about it.
"Hello."
"Oh, Ms. Yuki, welcome. It’s been quite a while."
It was Machiko’s favorite boutique in Akasaka. Though by no means spacious, it carried everything from jeans to evening dresses, and the selection was both tasteful and elegant. The shop was run by Yasuko Mizuki, an elegant woman in her forties. Ever since she first came to Tokyo and was introduced to the place by an acquaintance of her mother’s, Machiko had bought most of her clothes here, so Yasuko Mizuki always makes sure to select and set aside clothes that suit her.
"We’ve just received a dress that would look absolutely lovely on you, and I’ve put it aside for you,"
"Wow, I’d love to try it on. But I’ve gained a little weight — I wonder if it’ll still fit."
"It’ll be fine. Why don’t you try it on?"
"I’ll do that."
"I’d love to see you in it."
I tried it on and absolutely loved it. It fit like a glove — as if it had been tailor-made — and wasn’t the least bit tight.
"Thank you so much. Hiroko, please wrap this up."
Another young woman I recognized immediately folded the dress and placed it in a box. Just then, the phone rang, and Yasuko Mizuki went into the office in the back.

Machiko was wandering around the sales floor, casually looking at the fabrics and pattern samples.

"Oh, that reminds me," Hiroko said, as if suddenly remembering. "Did the shirt and jeans from the other day arrive in time?"

"Shirt and jeans?" Machiko asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry," she said, covering her mouth with her hand, "It was supposed to be a secret from you."

"A secret? Come on, Hiroko, tell me. What is it?"

"This is awkward. Listen, please don't tell the teacher that I told you. I've been sworn to secrecy."

By "teacher," she meant Yasuko Mizuki; Hiroko was studying fashion design here.

"I definitely won't say a word. What is it?"

"So you hadn't noticed at all? In that case, it was a huge success."

"Come on, just tell me already."

"No, the other day — it was quite a while ago now — around midnight, your mother came by the shop."

"Mama?"

"Oh, right. We were actually staying late to finish some urgent work. But I was really surprised."

"What on earth did she want?"

"Well, you see, your mother had bought a sports shirt and a pair of jeans here before, and she'd accidentally burned a hole in them with a cigarette. But she had a picnic the next day and had laid them out to wear. She really loves that outfit, so she was worried that if she found out it was ruined, it would be a disaster. So, she asked if there was anything exactly the same in the store, she said that if we could get the exact same item, she'd take it home and swap it out while the young lady was asleep, so she wouldn't notice. Since it was a request from none other than her mother, and she seemed so earnest, teacher and I turned the inventory upside down, and we finally found the exact same one."

"What kind of shirt?"

"You know, the plain navy blue one you bought around June... You bought it along with the jeans, didn't you?"

"Oh, so you bought it and brought it home."

"Yes — yes, I remember." Machiko desperately tried to act nonchalant. "And Mom asked me not to tell you about it..."

"That—when was that?"

"I wonder when that was..."

"Around the end of July?"

"Yes, you had a taxi waiting outside and you hurried home. You didn't tell your daughter at all..."

"Yes, that's right! It was the night of July 30th. I'm certain. The next day was a friend's wedding, so I remember thinking I wanted to get home early. "A wedding in the middle of summer — it's a bit odd, isn't it? You know what I mean? Besides,

even the guests have a hard time figuring out what to wear. But then again, that friend of mine is a bit of an eccentric."

She lowered her voice and left the shop.

However, Machiko wasn't listening anymore.

Before she knew it, she was walking aimlessly through the streets of Akasaka, carrying the box with the dress inside. She didn't even think about where she was going.

Oh, my God!

Of course there wasn't a hole in that shirt, and of course those jeans weren't dirty.

She was wearing brand-new ones that were exactly the same. "So what on earth is going on here? I knew the answer all along, but I was afraid to face it head-on. Yet, whether I liked it or not, I had no choice but to accept it. The fact that Machiko sneaked into the school on the night of July 30th, what she saw and heard in the audiovisual classroom, and the fact that someone made her inhale a drug and she lost consciousness — all of that actually happened! It wasn't a dream or anything like that. In an attempt to make Machiko believe that the incident was a dream, they went out of their way to find the same clothes and laid her down on the bed in her room. And at the school, they cleaned up everything — from the drivers' cigarette butts and everything else, making sure not a single trace was left behind. What about that secret entrance? There's no doubt that such a thing had been known for a long time. If they had used pliers to cut off and crumple the end of the wire that had snagged her shirt, no one would have noticed - just for Machiko alone, what a labor-intensive effort they went through. Even so, the fact that her own mother had played a part in that scheme was a tremendous shock to Machiko. If her mother knew, then her father couldn't possibly have been unaware either. What on earth was going on? Who on earth could she trust?

3. The Night Before

"So, the school festival is finally tomorrow, isn't it?"

"Yeah..."

Hideto stared intently at Machiko and asked,

"What's wrong?"

"What do you mean?"

"You've been looking a bit down lately."

"Really? I don't think so."

"Nothing in particular."

"No, you've been lost in thought a lot. Has something happened?"

Vivaldi was playing on the stereo in the room. Machiko didn't tell Hideto that her parents had been deceiving her.

If she told him, it might make her feel a lot better - but for some reason, she just couldn't bring herself to do it.

"I'll be there first thing tomorrow, too. I want to watch the stage rehearsal."

"You've been working on it pretty hard, haven't you?"

"Oh, it's just because it's a rare opportunity. It's nothing to get your hopes up about."

"Dad said he’s going tomorrow, too."
"That’s great. I hope he enjoys it."
"What’s the title? Can’t you tell me yet?"
"I guess I can tell you now. 'Schoolday of the Dead.’"
Machiko felt a vague shiver run down her spine. "That sounds kind of gloomy."
"Can’t help it. Given the subject matter."
"Is it scary?"
"I don’t think it’s enough to make you faint, though."
Machiko glanced at the clock and said,
"It’s already nine o’clock - shall we go home?"
"Yeah, I guess so."
"Want to stay for a cup of coffee? I’ll make some."
"Sure, please."
Machiko took the coffee tray and went into the room, where she found Hideto standing blankly by the window, gazing outside.
Sitting on the bed and sipping her coffee, she asked, "What were you thinking about while you were looking out there?"
"I was thinking this: You’ll definitely make a great wife." Hideto’s tone sounded somewhat distant, and it bothered Machiko.
"If you love someone, doesn’t anyone make a great wife?"
"Well... I’m not so sure about that." Hideto took Machiko’s hand and said, "Liking each other and making a good couple are two different things."
"Why are you saying that? That’s kind of weird, Hideto."
"Is it? No, I’m just a little on edge. It’s about tomorrow."
"It’s as if the school festival is the most important event of your life."
Hideto stared at Machiko with a slightly surprised look, but eventually, "...Well, I’m heading home for today. Say hi to your mom and dad for me," he said, standing up.
"Okay. See you there tomorrow, then." When they reached the entrance, Machiko looked up and closed her eyes. It was their habit to share a light kiss before he left.
Suddenly, Hideto pulled Machiko into a tight embrace. Machiko was a little startled and tried to pull away, but she soon relaxed and let him hold her. It felt different from their usual gentle kisses — it was burning with intensity. Machiko grew frightened. What’s going on? He’s different from usual. He’s never been this passionate before. What does he want?....
Hideto let go of Machiko and stared intently into her eyes with a piercing gaze.
"...Well, see you tomorrow." With that, Hideto practically ran out the front door.
Left behind, Machiko stood there in a daze, the flutter of that kiss still coursing through her.
Something felt off. That kiss had felt just like a goodbye kiss — as if they would never see each other again...

Returning to her room, Machiko turned off the light and lay down on her bed. Lying still like this in the dark, quiet room, she felt strangely calm. The light seeping in through the window drew a faint, pale band across the ceiling.

She thought to herself that being alone was a nice thing. Being with Hideto was, of course, fun.
But love is a turbulent surge of emotion, not peace of mind.
...Peace of mind?
Ever since she learned that secret, Machiko had lost all sense of peace, even when she was at home.
If she couldn't trust her father or mother, what was the point of having a home at all?
Still, what was that strange scene in the audiovisual classroom all about? How were her father and mother connected to that?
Even though three students had already been killed by that point, why on earth did they go to such elaborate lengths to make only Machiko believe it was a dream, without so much as a scratch?
Machiko was now convinced that even if Nishida had killed those three, the reason must be connected to what happened in the audiovisual classroom.
But if that were the case, it would mean her father and mother were also involved in the murders of those three students...
Everything was a complete mystery. Could the fact that Mr. Kurabayashi and Yukie had vanished also be connected to this? Surely those two couldn't possibly have been involved in the murders as well. However, in fact, Nishida had been trying to sneak into Yukie's hospital room. That means we should assume Yukie and the others knew something, too.
Perhaps Mr. Kurabayashi's explanation for his muttered words, "We have to get to the bottom of this," was just a cover-up.
After all, hadn't he realized that Nishida was the culprit?
If so, why did he keep quiet...?
I can't trust any of them. They're all lying and sticking their tongues out behind my back. Machiko felt an overwhelming wave of sadness.
There was a noise at the front door, and a moment later, Keiko peeked into the room.
"Machiko... Are you asleep?"
"I'm awake."
"Did Mr. Koyama leave?"
"A little while ago."
"Oh. I bought some delicious Japanese sweets. Would you like some?"
Machiko hesitated for a moment, then said, "Sure," and sat up.
When I went into the living room, Keiko was waiting there with a cup of bitter green tea.
"Dad's running late, isn't he?"
"What?"
"Mom!"
"Yeah, I think he'll be home soon."
Machiko suddenly felt as if she saw a look of exhaustion on her mother's face that she had never noticed before.
She was suddenly overcome by the urge to just say everything.
"Mom, there's something I want to ask you—"
She opened her mouth, but for a moment, she couldn't find the words.

"Is something wrong?" Keiko asked worriedly. "Is it about Mr. Koyama?"
"No, it's not that. It's about you, Mom. About you and Dad."
"Us? I wonder what it could be."
Machiko spoke as if she were pouring out everything inside her all at once. "What are you hiding from me? You two are in on this together, trying to deceive me, aren't you! I know everything! Tell me! What are you hiding?"
Keiko's eyes widened as she met Machiko's fiery gaze, but then she suddenly looked away and said, "...Why are you bringing this up all of a sudden? You're giving me a fright."
"Mom! That's not like you. I know full well that you're not the type to lie. It must have been so hard for you to keep putting on that calm face. It must be something really serious. But I'm not a child anymore. I can handle hearing anything. So please, tell me what happened!"
Keiko kept her face buried in her hands and remained silent. A long silence hung between them. Machiko sensed that her mother was hesitating. She'll tell me. She definitely will...
Keiko raised her head. "...Machiko."
Just then, the phone rang. Keiko stood up hurriedly, as if she'd been saved.
"Hello — it's me... Ah, Mrs. Oshima, it's been a while... No, not at all..."
Machiko returned to her room. She was so close.
Before her mother's call had ended, her father came home. Machiko hurriedly crawled under the covers.
As the door opened slightly,
"...Are you asleep already?" her father's voice asked.
Machiko buried her face in her pillow and didn't move. Eventually, the door closed, and she heard her mother say, "Welcome home."
Tears welled up in Machiko's eyes. What on earth is going on? What on earth is about to happen...
Machiko shuddered at the vague premonition. She was afraid of tomorrow coming.

4. School Festival

November 3rd. It was a beautiful, clear day from the morning on. Machiko's gloomy mood from the night before had faded somewhat.
Today was the school festival. I'll forget everything and just enjoy myself. At least for today.
She finished breakfast quickly and left the house. Her father was supposed to arrive around noon. When she got off the train at Kunitachi, she saw large groups of students heading toward the school. Everyone was walking with a lightness of step
Hideto must already be at school, Machiko thought. He'd been so absorbed in it — it was actually a bit surprising.
"Schoolday of the Dead," eh? It's a gloomy title, but since the actual incident that happened was so grim, I suppose it can't be helped. Anyway, I'll just enjoy watching it. The play starts at two in the afternoon.

Maybe I'll spend the morning walking around and looking at the other exhibits.

An arch modeled after the Arc de Triomphe in Paris stands at the school gate. It isn't made of cardboard or anything like that. It's a proper, impressive structure built from real wood. Above the gate, the words "Musashino Festival" are written in large letters. That's what Tezuka Academy's school festival is called. Come to think of it, Machiko realized, Dad used to call this school "Musashino Academy," too.

Upon entering the gate, members of the organizing committee handed out programs and maps at the entrance. She flipped through the program, but where the drama club's performance was listed, there was only a large "?" printed there.

Generally speaking, since the student body isn't very large, club activities aren't particularly active, but they made up for it with enthusiasm and financial resources, and every club put on quite elaborate displays.

Machiko wandered around the exhibits, exchanging a few words with familiar faces as she went.

Since it was still early, not many parents had arrived yet. As for the exhibits, some hadn't quite finished in time and were still frantically putting the finishing touches on their displays. The most popular ones were usually the music club and the film society.

They played jazz, rock, and film scores, and served cold drinks, so everyone gathered there when they got tired of walking.

Compared to these clubs that appealed to the general public, the Social Studies Club, the Newspaper Club, the History Research Society, and others — like the Chemistry Club — tended to have exhibits that felt like an extension of their studies, so they weren't very popular. When I peeked into the Chemistry Club's room, a girl from my class was sitting there looking glum in the empty room.

"I'd join if more people came," Machiko offered comfort,

to which the girl grumbled, "I had a plan that was sure to be a hit. But the teacher wouldn't approve it."

"What kind of plan?"

"It was called 'How to Make a Simple Bomb.'"

The Earth Science Club was the real surprise. Something that looked like a giant bowl was hanging from the ceiling, looming over the entire classroom.

"What's this?"

"It's a planetarium."

I see. There was a strange machine in the middle of the floor, surrounded by a circle of chairs.

"It must have been a lot of work to make this."

"Yes," the student in charge said happily. "We poured almost our entire budget into this."

"How did you hang them up?"

"With ropes."

"Won't it fall?"

"I don’t know," the staff member tilted her head. "I think it’ll probably be okay, though..."

The schoolyard was lined with food stalls, selling everything from oden to takoyaki, taiyaki, and even yakitori.

Of course, there weren’t any bars serving alcohol.

On the field, people were flying kites. There was a "Kite Flying Club," and members were competing to see who could fly the most unusual-shaped kites. The colorful kites looked perfect against the wide blue sky. It almost felt like New Year’s.

Machiko went to the art club’s exhibition room. The "Ikka Exhibition" was being held there, and a lineup of entries vying for the 50,000-yen prize were lined up in rows. She walked around looking at them, but she couldn’t seem to find any that looked like they’d sell to parents or guardians. The contest results had been announced at noon today, followed by an awards ceremony, so now it was just a matter of seeing how many of these paintings would actually sell.

There was a counter labeled "Please come this way to purchase artwork," and to her surprise, Principal Tezuka was sitting there with a slightly embarrassed look on his face.

When Machiko greeted him, he laughed and said, "Well, since the proceeds are going toward buying books for the library, they kept telling me to come out and help out so we could sell at least a few—"

Soon it was noon. Machiko went to the auditorium, thinking there might be some British people there, but a member of the drama club was standing guard at the entrance, insisting that no one was allowed in until the performance began. "They’re taking this a bit too seriously," Machiko thought, finding it amusing.

It was noon, so I went to the cafeteria. My father was supposed to come if he could, but I couldn’t see him anywhere. He must be busy.

When I finished eating and left the cafeteria, the number of parents and guardians had grown considerably, and the place had become much livelier.

An announcement came over the school intercom. "We will now proceed with the announcement of the first-place winners and the awards ceremony for the 'Ikka Exhibition’ contest, hosted by the Art Club. Please gather at the Art Club Exhibition Room."

After eating some taiyaki at a food stall in the schoolyard, I went over to find the Art Club Exhibition Room overflowing with people.

It seemed that one of the third-year students had won 50,000 yen, and everyone was in an uproar. A classmate called out to me.

"Yuki, have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"The paintings on display — apparently, there are quite a few parents who want to buy them."

"Really? Is that true?"

"I heard seven or eight have already sold. And they paid five or ten thousand yen for them. Right now, the principal is all alone, scrambling to wrap them up."

"There are some real oddballs out there."

"Yeah."
"That play we're talking about is about to start, isn't it? Want to go?"
Pushing through the crowd, a middle-aged gentleman emerged, carrying a large bundle wrapped in newspaper.
He seemed to be one of those eccentric types. He walked away, struggling to hold the large canvas.
Suddenly, Machiko felt she recognized the gentleman's face. Where had she seen him before? She thought about it, but couldn't remember.
"Hey, are you going?"
"I suppose so."
Urged on by her classmates, Machiko headed toward the auditorium.
"It seems to be getting quite a buzz."
"Are you in the cast too?"
"I don't know. I haven't heard a thing."
"Oh, really? But I'm looking forward to him explaining all sorts of things we didn't know."
That's not the whole story, Machiko thought. The secret she hadn't even told Hideto. The key to the incident might just be there...
Machiko stopped short, startled — the middle-aged gentleman who had just walked off carrying that painting. That's right, he was one of the men sitting in the audiovisual classroom that night. It must be him.
She thought about going back, but she had already come so far, so she gave up and entered the auditorium.
Even though it was twenty minutes before the show started, the hall was already seven-tenths full. It was noisy and bustling.
"Dad, I wonder what's going on..."
Worried, she looked around, but she couldn't see her father. Before long, a flood of people poured in, and the seats were filled in an instant.
Just as there were five minutes left, she finally saw her father and the principal enter. When Machiko waved, her father noticed and raised his hand. Her father and the principal walked toward the seats reserved at the front.
Well, it was about to begin. Machiko was restless with a mix of anticipation and anxiety. The opening buzzer sounded, the lights dimmed, and the murmur of the crowd subsided like the tide going out. Then an announcement declared, "We will now present the play "Schoolday of the Dead"."
Quietly, the curtain rose. Machiko almost let out a cry. On the dark stage, a large photograph of a girl in a sailor uniform with a black ribbon was lowered, and only that spot was illuminated.
The girl in the photograph was neither Haruko Ono, nor Kyoko Hosokawa, nor Mayumi Yanagida.
It was Yoshiko Yamazaki, the girl who had fallen to her death from a balcony at that high school in Osaka.

"Schoolday of the Dead", Written by Hideto Koyama

Opening Remarks

The stage is pitch black. A photograph of Yoshiko Yamazaki hangs from above, illuminated by a spotlight.
The playwright enters, bathed in the spotlight.
Playwright: "Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming today. It is, of course, quite unseemly for the playwright to make an appearance on stage, but just as books have dedications, I have decided to offer one here today. I would like to dedicate this play to my three friends who have passed away, and to this (pointing to the photograph of Yoshiko Yamazaki) schoolgirl. I imagine none of you know who she is, but she is actually a young girl who met a death that is by no means unrelated to the tragedy unfolding here. That will become clear in due course during the play... And, let us begin the play."
The author exits. The stage goes dark.

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Hideto knew Yoshiko Yamazaki... Machiko was so shocked that she almost jumped out of her chair, but managed to stop herself just in time. She had told Hideto about Yoshiko's incident - and yet, Hideto had never given the slightest indication that he knew Yoshiko. Come to think of it, Hideto had come from Osaka...

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Act I

As a spotlight falls on the center of the stage, three white wooden coffins are revealed, lined up in a row. (Solemn music)
From nowhere, a deep male voice booms: "...Awaken! Awaken! This is the Land of the Dead. It is your realm. Here, there is neither sun nor moon, nor is there day or night. There is only nothingness...
...only emptiness. You who were pitifully sent to this world in the prime of your youth... Awaken!"
The coffin lids creak open little by little. When they are fully open, Haruko Ono, Kyoko Hosokawa, and Mayumi Yanagida stand up, dressed in their school uniforms.

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For a moment, screams rang out from all over the hall. It was as if the ghosts of those three had truly appeared.

Machiko, too, felt a shiver run down her spine. They looked so much like them. Their physiques and hairstyles were crafted to be exact replicas, to the point of being eerie. Soon, a deathly silence filled the hall.

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Kyoko: "(Shivering) ...It’s cold... so cold."
Mayumi: "It really is... Oh, where are we? Where is this? It’s so dark, so lonely..."
Haruko: "Pull yourself together! This is the world of the dead. It’s a place we’ll never see while we’re alive, and once we’ve seen it, there’s no going back..."
Suddenly, the "voice" from earlier spoke:
Voice: "That’s right! This is the realm of the dead."
The three of them looked around in surprise.
Haruko: "Who? Who is it? Where are you?"
Voice: "I am everywhere. I am nowhere. I am the guardian of the realm of the dead."
Haruko: "Oh! Then please tell us. Is the realm of the dead always this dark?"
Mayumi: "Is it always this cold?"
Kyoko: "Is it always this lonely?"
Voice: "Death is peace. There are lands filled with peace and rest."
Haruko: "Where?"
Voice: "Right nearby... But you cannot enter there."
Haruko: "Why? Why not?"
Voice: "Because your deaths are not yet over."
Kyoko: "What do you mean?"
Voice: "You yourselves know that better than anyone. You were murdered. Until you realize who the murderer is — yourselves — your deaths will not be over."
Haruko: "No way! ...So unless we find the culprit, do we have to stay here?"
Mayumi: "In this darkness?"
Kyoko: "Oh, no!"
Suddenly, from the back of the stage, the voices of several men and women rise, as if singing.
Voices of men and women: "Who... who... who killed me..."
Kyoko: "What is that?"
Mayumi: "What sad voices!"
Voice: "Those are people who, just like you, were killed and sent here. Even now, they wander about, searching for the person who killed them."
Haruko: "Forever?"
Voice: "For years... for decades... for centuries..."
Kyoko: "That long?!"
Voice: "You should go look for them too. Go find the person who killed you. We’ll meet again then!"
Haruko: "Wait! Please wait!"
Voice: "Do you have something to ask?"

Haruko: "We were all killed by the same person. But I know who killed us. Then why did we end up here?"
Voice: "It is because you do not know the true culprit."
Haruko: "The true one? Are you saying there is another culprit?"
Voice: "It is not just the one who carried out the act. There must be someone who manipulated that person like a puppet. Unless you know that person, you cannot say you know the true culprit."
Mayumi: "Someone in the shadows..."
Kyoko: "Who is it?"
Haruko: "(Calling out to the 'Voice') Please! Lend us your strength. We're all just young high school students. If you take pity on us, please help us find the real culprit!"
Kyoko & Mayumi: "Please!"
A moment of silence. Eventually, the "Voice" answers.
Voice: "...Very well. In any case, let's hear your story."
Haruko: "Thank you!"
Voice: "......First, each of you, tell me the circumstances of the death."
Kyoko: "It started with me... It was a rainy night, and I was on my way home from a friend's house."
The stage goes dark.

Act II

A dimly lit stage. The sound of heavy rain. Kyoko enters from stage right, walking briskly with an umbrella.
Kyoko: "...Ugh, I'm so sick of this. This rain. I shouldn't have stayed out playing this late..."
From the left, a man in a raincoat (Nishida) enters, pulling up the collar to hide his face.
He passes Kyoko in a flash and exits immediately.
Kyoko stops and watches the man in the raincoat walk away.
Kyoko: "That's strange... I feel like I've seen that person before. Who could it be? H-he looks like that teacher. But no way. There's no way the teacher would be here. But it seemed like he was trying to hide his face so I wouldn't see him... Oh well. I must be mistaken. I'd better hurry on. I'm soaked and freezing."
After taking a few steps, Kyoko suddenly stumbles.
Kyoko: "Oh no. I twisted my ankle. ...It hurts... It hurts! ...Oh, what terrible luck."
She crouches down and starts rubbing her leg. She hears the sound of a car approaching from behind, and a bright light shines down on her.
Kyoko: "It's a car. I have to get out of the way..."
Suddenly, the sound of the car grows louder, and Kyoko freezes, standing rigid.
Kyoko: "Help!"
The lights sweep across the stage from left to right, followed by a loud thud as something crashes.
Kyoko lies sprawled in the center of the stage. A bent umbrella lies beside her.
A man in a raincoat enters from the left.

Man in Raincoat: "I finally did it. ...A murder, huh? It was easier than I thought. See? It's a pity, but it can't be helped. Just accept that you had bad luck."

The man in the raincoat approaches the fallen Kyoko and examines her. Suddenly, he jumps to his feet.

Man in Raincoat: "She's still alive! What the hell! Damn it... What should I do? No, I can't just leave her here. We passed each other earlier when I was checking her face, so she might have noticed me... I don't want to, but I guess I have no choice."

The man in the raincoat disappears offstage to the left. The sound of a car grows louder and louder from offstage to the left. The stage goes dark.

Kyoko's voice: "...And so, the culprit turned the car around and ran me over again, even though I was still alive..."

Voice: "How heartless, how cruel!"

Kyoko's voice: "I don't know anything about what happened after that."

Mayumi's voice: "Next is me."

Voice: "Go ahead."

Mayumi's voice: "That day, I stayed behind at school. I was looking forward to playing the grand piano in the auditorium. Since the recital was coming up soon, I was practicing hard. Now, I can't even touch a piano anymore..."

Scene 3

The sound of a piano drifts in from the dark stage.

The stage lights up.

A piano is placed at one end, and Mayumi is playing it. The piece is by Chopin. She continues to play on.

Nishida appears from the opposite wing of the stage.

Nishida: "She's playing. The rhythm of the music sounds as pleasant as a heartbeat. Ah! I, too, am a bit of an artist. It pains me to tear her away from the embrace of the goddess of music like that! But now is not the time to hesitate. My life is at stake - forgive me. It is my fate. This is destiny."

Nishida climbs the ladder at the side of the stage.

Soon, Nishida appears on the walkway beneath the ceiling, looking down on the center of the stage. (The spotlight follows Nishida the entire time.)

Nishida: "...She plays the piano, knowing nothing. How pitiful. But, in a way, it's for the best. He hasn't yet experienced even a tenth, not even a hundredth, of a lifetime's hardships - that's right. She'll wither away while still a flower, untouched by the world's filth. Come on, I can't dawdle! Shh! Someone's coming."

Professor Misawa enters. She walks over to Mayumi, who is playing the piano, and says,

Misawa: "Mayumi, you're working hard."

Mayumi: "Oh, Ms. Misawa."

Misawa: "You've gotten quite good. The recital is coming up soon, isn't it?"

Mayumi: "Yes - but I'm not confident."

Misawa: "What are you saying? You'll be fine. Just keep practicing at your own pace."

Mayumi: "Yes! Thank you."

Ms. Misawa exits.
Mayumi starts playing the piano again.
Nishida: "(Breathing a sigh of relief) Phew, she sure had me on the edge of my seat... Well, let's get to work."
Nishida takes out a screwdriver and begins unscrewing one of the screws holding the light in place.
Nishida: "...Alright, if I let go now, this heavy light will fall straight down onto the stage. Now, as for that one screw..."
Nishida drops one of the screws he removed. The screw clatters onto the stage.
Mayumi: "(Pausing her work) Oh, what was that sound? ...I wonder what it is? Something shiny has fallen."
Mayumi stands up from the piano, walks to the center of the stage, and bends down.
Mayumi: "It's a screw. I wonder where it came from..."
Nishida: "Stay right there. Don't move. I'm going to send you right now to where an old friend is waiting for you."
The light, now out of Nishida's grasp, falls toward Mayumi, who is looking down.
The stage goes pitch black. A thud.

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Voices of "Watch out!" and "Stop!" involuntarily rose from the audience. For a moment, Machiko also flinched, genuinely worried that the light might actually hit the student playing Mayumi. However, naturally, that light was probably just a prop made of cardboard or something - that scene was exactly as she had deduced. Had they gone to the trouble of removing the wire mesh stretched across that passageway again? She thought it was quite a hassle.
The problem was the circumstances surrounding the death of the third victim, Haruko. How on earth had Hideto depicted it...?

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Mayumi's voice: "...And so I was killed. The 'Farewell Song' I played on the piano truly became a farewell..."
Voice: "What a pitiful, utterly pitiful story!"
Haruko: "I'm the last one. With my two best friends murdered, I was consumed by a desire for revenge against the culprit. Ah, it still makes me so angry! If only I could have stabbed the culprit with a knife before I died!"
Voice: "Calm down! Calm down!"
Haruko: "Yes... I suspected that the culprit might be Professor Nishida. I'll explain the details later... Determined to take revenge with my own hands, I called Professor Nishida..."

Scene 4

The stage lights up to reveal the interior of Haruko’s home. On the left half of the stage is Haruko’s room, furnished with a desk, chair, bookshelf, and other items.

The right half is the hallway and bathroom. A sink and mirror. There is a telephone in the hallway.

Haruko is on the phone.

Haruko: "Hello, is this Mr. Nishida? This is Haruko Ono. Yes. I’m Haruko, Kyoko and Mayumi’s best friend. I need to talk to you. I’d like to meet you at school - yes, right now. Would evening be more convenient for you? You know what this is about. After all, you’re the one who killed Kyoko and Mayumi. I know it. I know it for a fact. So, tonight at 10 o’clock, at the back gate of the school..."

Haruko hangs up the phone.

Haruko: "Well, there’s no turning back now. With this, I have no choice but to go through with it..."

Haruko returns to her room and takes a sharp, gleaming knife from her desk. Haruko: "Kyoko, Mayumi, I’ll definitely avenge you with this knife. Even though just seeing blood makes me feel sick, this one time, I’ll stab that hateful bastard with this! I don’t care if I get killed — before I die, I’ll bite through his throat! Kyoko, Mayumi, it must have been so painful when you died. Please forgive me, everyone... It was all because of the prank I suggested. Now, I finally understand..."

Haruko suddenly realized,

Haruko: "That's right. Just in case, I should leave a note behind..."

Haruko sits down at her desk and begins writing a letter.

The stage goes dark for a few seconds.

The stage lights up again.

Haruko stands up from her desk,

Haruko: "Well, I’ve finished writing. Even if I die, this should reveal the truth. Oh, my hands are all smudged with ink."

Haruko walks down the hallway and enters the bathroom. At the sink, she takes off her glasses and washes her hands and face.

Nishida appears from the far end of the hallway. He is holding a clothesline.

Nishida quietly slips into the bathroom.

Haruko finishes washing, takes a towel, and wipes her face.

Nishida sneaks up behind her and suddenly loops the rope around Haruko’s neck.

Haruko: "Ah!..... Ah..... Ugh....."

Haruko flails her arms and legs, but Nishida tightens the noose.

Soon, Haruko goes limp and is laid on the floor.

Nishida: "That was a close call... With this, all three of them are taken care of. Right, I’d better make sure she didn’t leave anything written down."

Nishida goes to Haruko’s room and finds a letter and a knife.

Nishida: "What’s this knife?! (Glancing through the letter) ...I’m surprised! Was she planning to kill me with this?! That brat..."

Nishida puts the knife and letter in his pocket, grabs a chair, and returns to the bathroom.
Nishida: "Now, all I have to do is make this look like a suicide."
He lifts Haruko Nishida's body.
The stage goes dark.
Haruko's voice: "And so, without ever getting my revenge, I was killed. The culprit tried to make it look like I had hanged myself..."
A spotlight illuminates Haruko, hanging by the neck in the bathroom. The stage goes dark.

Scene 5

Haruko, Mayumi, and Kyoko.
Same as Scene 1. Three empty coffins on an empty stage.
Voice: "I understand very well the circumstances under which the three of you were killed. Now, let's ask the third daughter."
Haruko: "Yes!"
Voice: "How did you come to know the culprit?"
Haruko: "To answer that, I must start with a certain night in May. What we saw that night ultimately cost all three of us our lives."
Voice: "Very well. Let's hear that story."
The stage goes dark.
Haruko's voice: "One night in May, the three of us sneaked into the school's audiovisual classroom..."

Scene 6

At the back of the center stage, a large television screen showing nothing. Next to it is a telephone; the screen faces the audience. In front of it, five or six rows of benches are lined up. On the upstage side, there is a screen, and a VCR is placed there.
Haruko, Kyoko, and Mayumi emerge quietly, glancing around.
Kyoko: "Hey, hey, are we okay? Won't anyone find us?"
Mayumi: "No one ever comes to a place like this."
Haruko: "Besides, there's a PTA meeting today, so all the teachers are over there. We'll be fine. If we get caught, we'll just have to apologize."
The three of them find the VCR.
Haruko: "There it is, there it is."
Mayumi: "Let's play it."
Kyoko: "What's on it?"
Mayumi: "I don't know, that's why we're playing it."
Haruko: "Hey, you saw how Mr. Nishida carried that cassette in here like it was his most precious possession, right? That's no ordinary thing. There must be something really rare on there."
Kyoko: "Then hurry up and play it!"
Kyoko: "It's not a painting, is it?"

Mayumi: "It's a painting again."
Haruko flips the switch. The three of them gather in front of the TV. What appears on the screen looks like an old portrait. The portrait fades away and changes to a landscape painting. Various paintings appear one after another.
Haruko: "What is this? ...It must be some kind of art program or something. How boring."
Mayumi: "Look!"
Haruko: "It’s beautiful!"
Kyoko: "It’s wonderful!"
Dazzling jewels appear on the TV screen.
Photos of jewels appear one after another, and the three of them are mesmerized.
Haruko: "But that’s strange. Why is something like this on there?"
Mayumi: "Who cares? It’s wonderful, isn’t it?"
Nishida, holding a pipe, enters from the left. The three don’t notice him.
Nishida walks over to the cassette deck and turns it off.
The three girls are startled and turn around with a gasp.
Nishida: "What are you three doing in here?"
The three stand there, looking contrite.
Nishida: "You do know you’re not supposed to be in here, don’t you?"
Haruko: "I’m sorry. We just got curious..."
Kyoko: "We were wondering if there was anything interesting in here..."
Nishida: "Well, never mind. I’ll let you off this time. Don’t tell anyone you came in here."
The three: "Yes!"
Nishida: "Go on, get out of here."
The three: "We’re sorry." The three bow their heads and quickly leave.
Nishida hurriedly picks up the phone and dials a number.
Nishida: "Hello, this is Nishida. ...We’ve got a problem. Some students snuck in and saw that... cassette... I’m so sorry. I just looked away for a second... What should we do? Those three? Of course I know who they are... Yes, yes... I understand. I’ll give it a try." Nishida hangs up the phone.
Nishida: "What idiots. To have seen something like that. It’s a pity, but there’s no helping it. If I don’t do this, my life is in danger. Alright, I need to look up those three’s addresses right away and come up with a plan..."
Nishida exits.

*

Machiko was startled when she saw the cassette containing the painting and the jewel. Where on earth did Hideto find something like that?
Even so, has Hideto really solved the mystery of that painting and the jewels?
If not, the play won’t end. But why did he keep it a secret from even Machiko...?

*

The stage goes dark.
Voice: "...What does this mean?"
Haruko's voice: "I didn't understand it at the time either. But now I do. One day, I was flipping through an art book and came across a painting that appeared on that screen. And when I looked into it, I realized that all of those paintings had one major thing in common."
Voice: "And that is?"
Haruko's voice: "Every single one of them was a painting that had been stolen and was currently missing."
Voice: "I see..."
Haruko's voice: "So, I thought that Professor Nishida, who saw us looking at those paintings, was trying to kill us. I believe that was correct. But even I don't know anything beyond that. Who was... manipulating Professor Nishida..."
Voice: "Wait! I'll tell you."
Haruko's voice: "You?"
Voice: "I am permitted to travel back in time. Of course, it is limited to special cases... but... Your misfortune has moved me. I'm not sure what I'll discover, but I'll recreate the events that followed. Watch closely."
The stage brightens. The same scene as before. Men A, B, C, and D, all wearing suits, are seated on a bench, and a man wearing glasses stands in front of the TV. Beside him, Haruko, Mayumi, and Kyoko are watching.
A landscape painting appears on the TV screen.
Man in glasses: "Well, what do you think? It's a masterpiece by Van Gogh."
Man A: "This was stolen three years ago, wasn't it—"
Man in glasses: "That's right. We tracked it down through various channels and acquired it. After all, this is a true treasure."
Man B: "Ten million!"
Man in glasses: "(Laughing) You must be joking. This is a completely different matter from buying something on the open market."
Man C: "Twelve million!"
Man in glasses: "Van Gogh will be yours alone. You can tuck it away deep in your home and enjoy it all by yourself. It's not like viewing it at a museum, jostled by a crowd of people who don't know a thing about art."
Man B: "15 million!"
Man in Glasses: "Any higher bids? It took a lot of effort to acquire this. Please keep that in mind."
Man D: "17 million!"
Man B: "20 million!"
Voice: "That's right."
Haruko "What is this? Are you selling that painting?"
Kyoko: "So, you were selling the stolen painting right here?"
Haruko: "At school! What on earth is going on!"
Meanwhile, the bidding continues.

Haruko: "Then, the jewelry must be the same. It’s probably another valuable, historic item that was stolen, isn’t it?"
Mayumi: "Then, that cassette is..."
Haruko: "It’s dangerous to move the actual item, so they recorded it on a videotape and used that for the transaction."
Kyoko: "To do something like that in a classroom! But who is that man with glasses? Isn’t that Mr. Nishida?"
Voice: "Wait! Let’s listen for a moment." The bidding continues.
Man C: "Thirty million!"
Man with glasses "Are there any other bids?
Man C: "When can we get it?"
Man in glasses: "We must be extremely careful when handing it over. It would be disastrous if the police were to catch wind of this. We have a plan for how to handle that."
Man C: "When will that be?"
Man in Glasses: "I can give you a specific date. It’s November 3rd."
Man C: "November 3rd? Is there a reason for that?"
Man in Glasses: "Yes. On that day, this school is holding its cultural festival. We’d like you to attend as members of the general public, and we’ll hand over the painting right in front of a large crowd."
Man A: "Right in front of everyone? Isn’t that dangerous, with something that big?"
Man in Glasses: "On the day of the festival, we’ll be displaying and selling paintings created by the students. We’ll ask you all to purchase those paintings, but since I’ll be the one wrapping them, the contents will have been swapped out for the actual merchandise..."
The stage goes dark.

*

Machiko sat frozen in her seat, unable to move. It had just dawned on her.
That night, in the audiovisual classroom, the voice of the narrator coming through the microphone had been Principal Tezuka’s!
Holding the painting wrapped in newspaper as if it were precious, the man came out of the school building, hurried across the parking lot, and got into the parked Mercedes.
"Hey, let’s head back," he called out.
"Are you heading home already?" the driver asked, looking puzzled.
"Yeah, let’s go. But be careful. Don’t drive too fast."
"Understood."
As the car began to move, the man leaned back in his seat and breathed a sigh of relief. I finally got my hands on it!
He gently stroked the package sitting in the passenger seat and smiled with satisfaction. After all, this thing is worth twenty million yen!

Just as they glided out of the school gate, the Mercedes suddenly jolted to a stop. The man yelled at the driver.
"Hey! I told you to be careful!"
Looking out the window, the man was stunned - police cars. Police cars were lined up in rows, filling the road.
Just how many were there? Tens, dozens...
Men who looked like detectives rushed toward the car.
"What do you want, you lot!" the man said, rolling down the window. "Get out of the way!"
"You'll have to get out."
"What? What on earth—"
"We're going to take a look at that drawing over there."
The blood drained from the man's face. In a trembling voice,
"This is... this is a drawing a student just bought at school."
"Is that so? We'll still have to search the car."
The detective reached through the window toward the drawing. The man frantically swatted his hand away.
"Stop it! Don't be rough! This is a valuable—"
"A valuable — what?"
The man gave up and slumped back against the seat. Sweat beaded on his pale forehead.

*

Principal Tezuka was hurrying toward the back gate, hiding among the general public so as not to stand out.
He had gotten up in the middle of the play and slipped out of the auditorium. He had absolutely no idea what had happened. The only thing he knew for certain was that everything had been exposed. Had the police already turned their attention to his home?
But in any case, he had to get out of here. Once he left the school building, fortunately, there was hardly a soul in sight.
The only thing he knew for certain was that everything had been exposed. Had the police already turned their attention to his home as well?
Principal Tezuka ran toward the back gate. Seeing the red flashing lights of a police car beyond the gate, he froze in shock. It was all over!
He had to hide somehow...
"That's it!"
Principal Tezuka remembered a spot in the chain-link fence where Yuki's daughter used to come and go that could be removed.
He could probably get out that way - it was behind the gym, wasn't it?
Breathless, he finally reached the spot and looked around to see if anyone was nearby. It seemed safe.
Principal Tezuka shook the wire fence loose, pushed it inward, climbed over it, and dashed outside.

Instantly, strong hands grabbed him from both sides.
"Well, well, isn't this the principal?" said the detective.
"Coming in and out through a place like this — I can't say I'm impressed, especially in front of the students."

Scene 7

Same as Scene 1. Three empty coffins in the center. Haruko, Mayumi, and Kyoko stand frozen in shock.
Voice: "...Well then, the person who brought death upon you will now be revealed. You are permitted to enter the land of rest and peace!"
Haruko: "But... I don't understand! Who is it? Who on earth is that—"
Voice: "(Suddenly, his solemn, theatrical tone shifts.) Enough of this! I'm done following the script! I'll tell you everything. All the secrets!"

*

As the owner of the "Voice" appeared in the spotlight, a murmur rippled through the audience. Though the echo had made it hard to tell, the person playing the "Voice" was none other than Professor Kurabayashi.
Professor Kurabayashi looked somewhat thinner and more haggard than before, but his stride as he stepped forward onto the stage was steady, and he even had a faint smile on his face. Then, he raised his hand to quiet the murmurs in the hall, waited for the crowd to settle, and spoke.
"Hello, everyone. It's been a while. I had some things I needed to think about, so my wife, Yukie, and I had disappeared for a while. If I could, I would have liked to stay hidden forever, but that wasn't possible. I have a painful mission. I've come here today to fulfill it... Everyone, listen carefully. This isn't a play or anything like that. Everything that's been performed on stage so far is true. But that's not all. The truth is much, much worse — I imagine this will come as a tremendous shock to you all. But I want you to listen carefully. You should be mature enough by now to face this trial. I believe in you."
The auditorium fell silent as if someone had poured water over it.
"Let me start by stating the most crucial fact first. This school was established as a front for a massive criminal organization. Why are there so many wealthy individuals on the school's board of trustees? Why have the daughters of influential figures gathered here? It is because, behind the scenes, this school is a large-scale international smuggling ring, and the trustees are its executives. The wealthy, who were obsessed with collecting art, gathered at this school to acquire stolen masterpieces. The school's management was sound, and it enjoyed great public trust. Who on earth would suspect that smuggling was taking place behind the scenes? Of course, there were people among the teachers who worked for that organization. Mr. Nishida was one of them, and so was I... But let me make this clear: not all the teachers and parents were involved in the crime. The vast majority

of them had nothing to do with it. I want to make that clear - I came to this school knowing nothing. When I was eventually summoned by the principal and told to work for the organization, I struggled with it greatly. But I had no other choice. It was ten years ago now, but I once killed someone in the heat of a fight. I was only charged with a minor offense, but the principal knew about it. Of course, if that incident came to light, I wouldn't be able to work as a teacher anywhere. I had just married Yukie, so I simply couldn't refuse. But eventually, I learned that this organization wasn't just dealing in art and jewels. Drugs. They were involved in drugs as well. This came as a shock. I could have convinced myself that smuggling paintings and jewels wasn't such a big deal, but I simply couldn't justify this. Drugs are a terrifying thing that destroys people. In fact, the girl whose photo appeared at the beginning of this play died after being tormented by drug-induced hallucinations. And then came the murder of one of Mr. Nishida's students. On the day Mayumi Yanagida was killed, I had stayed behind at school and caught a glimpse of Mr. Nishida. However, he later claimed he had only been at school until noon, which made me suspicious. But I couldn't report Mr. Nishida to the police. Under the organization, Mr. Nishida had an important role: appraising the authenticity of stolen paintings and jewels, assessing their value, recording it on video, and preparing for the "auction" held on PTA night. Even so, I had been telling myself that perhaps all three of them really had died in accidents or by suicide. But now, even Yukie had been targeted — Mr. Nishida must have thought that the reason I started acting strange was because Yukie knew something and had spoken up. Driven by the fear that he would be made to take responsibility for the tape being seen and that he might be eliminated, he went on a killing spree, targeting one person after another who seemed to know even the slightest bit. I took Yukie and fled. I thought it was better than being targeted and killed by the organization. But we couldn't keep running forever. Unless we crush the organization, we'd be letting down the three students who died. Of course, I intend to atone for my own sins as well. But there are others who must be punished too. One is the principal. But in reality, the principal was just a subordinate within the organization. There's someone else who was leading this organization."

Suddenly, spotlights from all directions swept toward a corner of the front row of the audience. "It's this man!" Professor Kurabayashi shouted. "It's Shozo Yuki!"

The auditorium erupted into chaos. Some people stood up, others tried to leave, and voices flew back and forth: "What's going on?" "Isn't this just a play?"

"It's a lie... it's a lie..." Machiko muttered, as if in a daze.

Then, as the lights in the hall came on all at once, the students who had been seated stood up one after another and headed for the exit.

Machiko remained seated, frozen to her chair, unable to move.

Her classmates streamed past her one after another. Everyone seemed at a loss as to how to interpret what had just happened. Driven by anxiety, they were trying to get out of the auditorium as quickly as possible.

After the confusion lasted for a while, the hall finally began to empty. Seeing her father slowly stand up from a seat far ahead, Machiko rose from her seat as if waking from a daze and stepped into the aisle.

At several entrances to the auditorium, men who were clearly detectives appeared simultaneously. Machiko ran down the aisle toward her father. "Dad! Run!"

"Machiko..."

"Hurry up and run! They're going to catch you!"

"It's no use," Shozo said quietly. The detectives were blocking every aisle. "Tezuka managed to escape partway, but even he didn't manage to get away."

"Dad..."

"I'm sorry, Machiko."

"Daddy..." Machiko repeated.

Professor Kurabayashi had disappeared from the stage, but in his place, several detectives appeared and made their way down toward Machiko and the others. Among them was Hideto. His pale face was frozen in tension as he stared intently at Shozo alone.

When one of the detectives presented an arrest warrant, Shozo nodded.

"We won't handcuff you. Please come with us."

"Thank you for that," Shozo said, turning to Hideto. "Who are you, exactly?"

"Just a student — Yoshiko Yamazaki, who died in Osaka, was my childhood friend."

"The girl who jumped off the balcony, right?"

"You were a board member at that school, weren't you? And you distributed drugs among the students."

"I see. So that's why the police held back on investigating this latest murder case."

"We were conducting the investigation discreetly. The organization itself was the target."

"You pulled it off brilliantly. I didn't suspect a thing." Shozo said calmly. "Well, shall we go? Machiko, go home. I'm counting on you to look after Mom."

Machiko was left all alone. Hideto never once looked at her.

5. Farewell, Academy

"Mom, you knew everything, didn't you?"

"Yes, well, we were married, after all. It couldn't be helped. By the time I found out, Dad had already become a big shot."

"So that's why you didn't want to come to the school."

"I just couldn't bring myself to go to the very place where Dad was doing bad things."

The two of them were sitting in the living room of the apartment. What time was it now? Was it daytime or nighttime?

"What are you going to do from here on out?"

"It'll work out somehow." Keiko smiled brightly.

"What are you going to do?"

"This has made me busy again. You know, this kind of life suits me better. I've actually been bored to death until now. I just end up overthinking all sorts of things, don't I? It's much better to be so busy I can't think about anything. I'll go bring him

food every day. After all, he’s got a fancy palate. The food at the detention center or prison probably won’t suit his taste. I’m going to be busy. Maybe I should buy a commuter pass. But... it’s not a student pass, and it’s not a commuter pass either... What kind of pass is it supposed to be?"

"I don’t know."

"Well, anyway, I’m going to go talk to the lawyer."

"Okay."

"Machiko, are you all right?"

"I’m fine. Don’t worry."

"Do you resent Dad?"

"No. I still love him."

"Let’s have the lawyer tell him that. I’m sure he’ll be happy."

After her mother left, Machiko went into her room and lay down on her bed — Mom really is a good person. It’s wonderful that she can stay so positive at a time like this. Dad is such a lucky man.

Deep down, Machiko still loved her father. But the incident was far too serious for that to make up for everything.

The doorbell rang. If it was a reporter, she wouldn’t answer. She went to the entrance and looked through the peephole.

It was Yukie. She hurried to open the door.

"Yukie!"

"Machiko — can I come in?"

"Sure. Come in. I’m alone right now."

Once we settled into the living room, Yukie said, "Why? Machiko, you must resent us, don’t you? But you know, your father—"

"I don’t resent you at all. It’s only natural. After all, it was Papa who caused Mr. Kurabayashi so much suffering."

"He suffered a lot too. So did I. I worried about how much it would hurt you, and when I thought about everyone at school, I wondered if it would be better to just keep quiet... We even decided once that we’d die together. Please forgive me."

"Forgive you...? For what?"

"The day I met you at the hotel — we were staying there. I was being such a fool, throwing a tantrum because I wanted to stay at a first-class hotel at least once before we died. Mr. Koyama talked me out of it, so I changed my mind."

"So, Hideto caught up with you. That’s why he took so long to come back."

"He came to our room later and told me that if I truly cared about you and the school, I had to turn myself in. So we made up our minds..."

"Hideto said that?"

"Yes. You know, Machiko, Mr. Koyama really—"

Machiko cut her off, "Stop it, Yukie. Please, just stop that."

"But—"

"I don’t want to hear about it right now. Don’t say anything about Hideto." Machiko’s voice choked up as she held back the tears threatening to spill over. Yukie also

closed her mouth and nodded. Once Machiko had finally swallowed her tears, she said, "...So, Yukie, what are you going to do now?"

"What do you mean..."

"Well, my parents have forgiven him, so I'm going to graduate high school, find a job, and then — wait for him to get out of prison. I think I'll be pretty busy. I want to bring him visits as often as I can."

Machiko couldn't help but laugh. "Yukie, you really are just like my mom."

Machiko stood in the deserted schoolyard, gazing at the empty school building. A cold north wind whipped past, making her pull her collar tight.

The gray, heavy, overcast sky made the desolate scene feel even lonelier. It had been half a month since the true nature of Tezuka Academy had been exposed, causing a media frenzy. All the board members and teachers involved in the organization had been arrested, and the networks extending from here across Japan were being uncovered one after another.

What became of the academy? It was dissolved and closed down. The students each moved on to different schools. All that remained was this modern school building. I heard talks were underway for a private university somewhere to purchase it, but in any case, Tezuka Academy no longer existed.

It had been six months since I enrolled here. Only six months had passed. What a change. Six months ago, when I was feeling so smug, wondering if I was allowed to be this happy, seems like a distant past now.

Now I am the daughter of a criminal, with no idea what to do tomorrow.

My mother seemed intent on leaving me with relatives, but I wanted to stay with mother, at least. The game of playing detective is over - what an ironic outcome! Machiko laughed at herself. No matter how much she laughed, it wasn't enough. How naive and clueless she had been. Everyone else — except her — knew the truth. Her father, her mother, Hideto, Yukie... Only she, all alone, had remained in the dark, playing detective and racking her brain over every possible scenario. It was absolutely ridiculous! Truly laughable. It's just like a detective novel!

My heart ached as if it were being squeezed.

Machiko stared up at the school building for a while, but eventually went inside, climbed the stairs, and stepped out onto the third-floor balcony.

Suddenly, she remembered Yoshiko Yamazaki — the way she used to walk along the balcony railing. Yoshiko had been doing drugs.

The very drugs Machiko's father had been selling. It was a strange twist of fate that Machiko had been the one to witness her death. Machiko wished she could be Yoshiko from back then. I can do anything. If I could die believing that I could become a bird and fly through the sky, there would be nothing happier than that...

"What are you doing?!"

Machiko tossed aside her half-coat, scrambled onto the railing still wearing her shoes, and stood up straight. A five-centimeter-wide path stretched out in a straight line.

Let's go, come on! I'm going to walk. It's nothing. I just have to walk!

Step by step, Machiko began walking along the railing. Occasionally, the wind picked up, causing her body to sway. Even so, Machiko kept walking.
A voice called out from below. It was Hideto. "That’s dangerous! Get down! Can’t you hear me?!"
Machiko continued walking in silence. Hideto dashed into the school building and ran up to the third floor.
When Hideto stepped out onto the balcony, Machiko shouted, "If you come any closer, I’ll jump!"
Hideto stopped in his tracks. "...Hey, listen to me, Machiko."
"I don’t want to hear anything. Just go away, Hideto."
"You hate me, don’t you? It’s only natural. But please, just listen to me."
"Stop it. I don’t hate you. I just hate myself. I just... regret ever being born."
Tears welled up in Machiko’s eyes and streamed down her face.
"Machiko. It’s true that I schemed to get to know you in order to get close to your father. That’s the truth. It was a despicable way to go about it, but it was the only way — but you know, I really did love you. It was painful to keep deceiving you. You have no idea how much I came to hate myself. I thought about giving up countless times. Hurting you was agonizing. But when I thought of Yoshiko, who had died, and the three students, I couldn’t stop. No matter how much you resented me, I couldn’t give up."
Machiko stood there, frozen.
"Stop this foolishness. Come on, get down."
Machiko stared intently at the ground far below. She thought that was where the peace she sought lay.
It’s just a short jump. Then everything will be over. It’s simple.
Come on, jump!
A sudden strong gust of wind blew, and Machiko’s body swayed. Hideto rushed forward.
"Machiko!"
The next moment, Machiko was sobbing uncontrollably in Hideto’s arms.
"Machiko... Machiko..." Hideto held Machiko tightly.
When she stopped crying, Machiko smiled and looked at Hideto. "Thank you, Hideto."
"You’re okay now, right? You won’t do anything like that again, will you?"
"Yes. I won’t do it again. I’m fine."
"Well then, let’s go downstairs."
The two stepped out onto the schoolyard and looked up at the school building.
"It was all just a bad dream."
"That’s right. A new semester is about to begin."
"Hideto. Let’s part ways here. Thank you. I was happy."
"Machiko. I don’t want that. I’ll never leave you."
"But — you used to like Yoshiko, didn’t you?"
"We were childhood friends, but we were never lovers or anything like that. You’re the only one I’ve ever loved."
"But it’s still no good. Dad—"
Hideto cut her off and said, "I just came back from seeing your father."

Machiko was taken aback. "Dad?"
"He asked me to let us get married once you graduate from high school."
Machiko was dumbfounded and cried out. "You — you're out of your mind!"
"Yeah. Anyone falls out of their mind when they're in love."
"What did Dad say?"
"He was smiling. He said he wouldn't mind as long as you're okay with it."
Machiko gazed intently into Hideto's gentle eyes. Then she threw her arms around him with all her might. "...Well then, let's go tell Dad right now."
"This feels kind of strange."
"It's fine if it feels strange. Marriage isn't a strange thing, after all."
"I suppose that's true. But it still feels different."
"Do you mind that it feels different?"
Machiko smiled. "Not at all."
Just as they were about to start walking, Machiko suddenly seemed to think of something. "Hey, there's something I want to ask you."
"What is it?"
"That play — what was supposed to happen after that?"
"That's an eternal mystery."
"Oh, you sneaky..."
"But I really did a disservice to the drama club."
"How did you get that cassette?"
"I made it myself. I looked through that art collection the Tokyo University re-taker sold off, and I saw that Haruko had marked a few of the paintings. So, I recorded it on video."
"Oh, but you said that collection had already been sold." Machiko glared at Hideto. "You've been lying to me all along, haven't you?"
"Come on, don't say that."
"Don't lie to me anymore."
"I know. I swear. Oh, and there's one more thing I need to tell you."
"What?"
"The killing of those three was Nishida's own decision. Your father didn't order it."
"Really?"
"Your father didn't even know those three had seen the tape. So he apparently never even suspected that Nishida was the culprit. If he'd known, he wouldn't have allowed it. Other executives have confirmed this story as well."
A look of relief spread across Machiko's face.
"Thank goodness! That's been weighing on my mind the whole time."
Machiko had secretly resolved in her heart that if her father had ordered the killing of those three, she herself would have to die as well.
"Then let's go see Dad."
"But before that..."
"What is it? You're not planning to pull off some weird stunt again, are you?"
"That's not it. I mean, it's already three o'clock. I'm starving. I didn't eat anything for lunch."

Hideto smiled and put his arm around Machiko’s shoulder — the two of them crossed the schoolyard with youthful steps, — without looking back even once.

Translator's note:

Greetings all, I'm Arthur Aiwass of the NineSoulsSea and thank you so much for reading **Schoolday of the Dead** by **Jirou Akagawa**! It's a very fun mystery novel and I hope you guys enjoyed it as much as I did during the translation. I've moved on to the **BookWalker Unlimited Reading** selection, so, I'll be climbing through the pages and translating whatever I manage to get there.

One very important thing that I wanted to say was that during the translation for this work, my good friend and the person without whose help this translation would've never happened in the first place, **aNobody101**, has committed suicide. The fact that the book itself deals with themes of suicide heavily made this feel like some sort of cruel joke by the divine powers. I miss him a lot. aNobody101 had provided great guidance to me while he was still alive - including telling me the method to obtain BookWalker raws. He was a very creative and passionate person who suffered way more than he deserved to. He's in a better place now, but I'm still going to miss him. Please, remember him. Don't let him ever be forgotten.